

Settler Society Interpreters in First Nations, Metis and Inuit Settings

First off, let me state this: I am no expert. I am a member of settler society who has had the gift of time with a handful of Indigenous Elders, esteemed community members and traditional First Nations, Metis and Inuit people. I am green in my learning. Please understand that what I say is an invite for discussion and for education within the interpreting community. I want to talk with all of you, my colleagues, about everything I am about to say. I want to learn from your perspectives.

In my work, I have made many mistakes when interpreting for Indigenous people. I have made people uncomfortable with eye contact. I have arrived at traditional events in a pants suit when it would have been most appropriate to bring a skirt. I have been ill-prepared to spell non-English words despite the importance of those proper nouns to the setting, and have oppressed Indigenous persons by not asking. I have walked counter-clockwise when I should have followed the circle clockwise. I have placed First Nations values below the values of our profession by refusing to participate in introductions in any way. I have created cultural rifts by refusing offered food. I have treated individuals as spokespersons for entire groups of people.

I will continue to make mistakes. I will continue to learn how introducing another culture to my work impacts the choices I make and the process I will follow. I will, by these mistakes, oppress Aboriginal people. This is why it is imperative that I re-examine my choices often. We work so hard to lessen the oppressive mistakes we make as non-Deaf interpreters working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people. I believe we must work as hard to open ourselves up to the feedback of First Nations, Inuit and Metis consumers. While I don't believe I should proclaim to be an ally, I can work hard to behave as an ally more and more.

And part of this work I must do is to check my privilege... often. Privilege is complex. I can't fully see the scope or impact of privilege, but I'll strive to see the parts that I can, and really pay attention to underprivileged voices, because it's important.

In my experience, part of having privilege is that it feels "normal". It is too easy to just go about my life with multiple levels of privilege without realizing the impact of my actions. There are so many groups that are systemically given more privilege: hearing, white, cis, settler, male, straight, able-bodied, with English as a first language, non-impooverished, without mental health barriers, and the list goes on. We may be part of one or many of these groups, and having the privilege of such, have the opportunity to move through life without even seeing the vastness of daily oppression and barriers to someone from Canada's least privileged groups.

Personally, I see pieces of the other side of the lens when it comes to issues of gender, orientation and normative relationship structures. I see the harm that is created to me as a member of underprivileged groups in these areas. Yet the privilege that comes from being a member of settler culture is not visible to me in the same way. Each group with less systemic

privilege has a different experience, and intersectional members of these groups have yet another experience. I don't believe that it is something to use as comparison, but it is certainly something to take from. I take from my experience to understand the pressing importance for change - because I know oppression and microaggressions hurt and spread. And I know that when others use their privilege to support my identity, it is healing.

My experiences hold markings of settler privilege. I, for one, do not have to consider whether the color of my skin may bring violence, whether the way I speak may cause me to be denied service at a restaurant, whether others will typically assume me to be dangerous, or whether the police will arrest *me* if I call for help when my home is broken into. I am not presumed drunk until proven sober. I am not presumed lazy or unemployed until proven hard-working. If I have a good job, people say it is because I earned it.

What can I do with all this privilege? How can I work with people, particularly the First Peoples of Canada, in respectful and empowering ways? How can I show that my consumer's culture is valued and important in my interpreting process and decisions?

There's no easy answer. I've worked hard towards making more informed choices. I strive to pay attention to what is said by those on the receiving end of ongoing colonization, and maintain awareness that my lens will skew and bias my interpretation of what others describe. Then I think about it and work at it as much as I can. I invite others into dialogue, and I aim to embrace challenge.

When seeking to better work with people, I am told by Aboriginal consumers, over and over, that it is not one way. There are many Nations, many peoples, and many traditions. The old interpreter adage comes to me again and again: know thy consumer. I have to find my assumptions and educate myself to reduce them. I *must* ask. I must find the *right time and place* to ask people about their personal and individual perspectives, and then listen very carefully. At the same time, I have to bear in mind that it is **not** the responsibility of others to educate me. Particularly for those who face a lot of oppression, it is exhausting, and it is another layer of privilege for me to assume that I always have the right to their energy and time. So I know I need to work to educate myself. I need to find a network of people that I can ask questions of between assignments, but I also need to seek resources on my own.

As I learn, I try to clean up my past mistakes. This has been a humbling experience at times. In acknowledging the rift I had created by not participating personally in certain events, I was told in very kind words that it was about time I recognized the issue. When discussing the change to my practices around eating during a booking, I was given insight into the discomfort my earlier decisions had caused. When I informed a presenter that I was preparing better by educating myself on the correct spellings of northern community names, the presenter tested me... and I failed. At first, following my own cultural biases, I expected advice when talking about mistakes and best practices. This expectation of advice usually created further tensions. I learned as much from the process of cleaning up my mistakes as I did from the mistakes themselves.

I want to reduce my contribution to the status quo within a racist system and a society largely ignorant to Indigenous populations. I know that I am still ignorant to many of the mistakes that I have made. Each time I seek out my own education, I see more of see the

vastness of my ignorance. I am grateful to see it - this gives me a starting place for my professional and personal growth. I get better at asking for perspectives on my work. I build cultural competency. I show that I am willing to learn and to try something new, both personally and professionally. Because of this I build healthier working relationships. I also improve the foundations of my work. The better I examine the lens through which I see the world, and the better that I can be at understanding the lens of others, the better I understand my consumers' meaning and intent. Ultimately, I am a better interpreter than I was for it.

I want to grow, and I want us to grow as a community and as a profession. I am curious to know your experiences and your perspective. I look forward to discussion.

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