

## **Spoken Language Agency Panel**

**Saturday, January 26, 2013**

**DCC**

**1-4pm**

**Moderator: Jim Brune**

Agencies in attendance:

Francine Kuipers, CEO and owner of Accent on Languages,

Phuong-Lan Thi Do with LanDo Interpreting,

Taryk Rouchdy from International Effectiveness Center IEC,

Koy Saephan from Excel.

Bios:

**Francine Kuipers, CEO and owner of Accent on Languages:** Francine Kuipers was born in France and moved to California in 1978. She was the principal of the French American School until 1985. She taught French and Spanish at various schools in the US, France and the University in Peru.

Francine has founded 5 language companies since 1986: Linguatheque of Los Angeles, Access Language Services, Accent on Languages, Accent on Culture, and Berkeley Language Institute (which focuses on training translators and interpreters).

As a linguistic and cultural consultant, Francine has been involved in various cultural programs in France, Peru, China, Russia and the West Bank. She is passionate about languages and the promotion of cultural sensitivity. She developed language and cultural programs sold in schools throughout the world and used by the US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Phuong-Lan Thi Do:** LanDo Interpreting is located in San Francisco. Lan Do has a B.A. in Business management. She established Lan Do Interpreting in September 1993. Prior to that she was the Director of The Language Bank, Inc. in San Francisco, director of Seward County Community College Refugee 4. Program, Liberal, KS and a Case-manager/ interpreter-translator, Springfield Area Council of Churches Refugee Program, Springfield, MO  
Lan do is Fluent in English, Vietnamese, and Conversational in French.

**Taryk Rouchdy from IEC:** Taryk Rouchdy was born in Alexandria Egypt in 1942. He holds an M.A. in Philology and an M.A. in Shakespearean Era. He is Fluent in 5 languages and semi fluent in 4 more. He Moved to the United States in 1967 and founded International Effectiveness Centers in 1972.

**Koy Saephan from Excel:** Koy Saephan, founder and CEO of Excel Interpreting, LLC has over 13 years of experience as a professional language interpreter and translator. Ms. Saephan received her B.A. in English Literature from U.C.L.A., and completed over two years of law school before launching Excel Interpreting, LLC.

In 2000 she became the first registered court interpreter for the Mien language in the State of California. Ms. Saephan's commitment to the Sacramento community is demonstrated by her past and present volunteer work: Chair of Lao Family Community Development, Inc. and board member of United Lu-Mien Community.

Additionally, Ms. Saephan held the position of Educational Outreach Project Coordinator for the Tulare County District Attorney's Office where she translated written materials addressing victim violence, statutory rape, and parenting into four languages – Mien, Hmong, Lao and Lahu.

### **Questions for panelists:**

#### **1. Start by briefly telling us a little about your agency.**

- **How long your agency has been in existence**
- **Where you are located**
- **How long you have been providing ASL services**
- **How many people work for your agency (interpreters, staff)**

**IEC:**IEC has been in existence since 1972. IEC is headquartered in Corte Madera and SF. IEC has been providing ASL since 1992. They use about 350 interpreters in the North Bay and also serve 11 other states. The North bay is their prime location.

**Excel:** Excel is located in Sacramento and has been in existence since 2000. About 6 people work at Excel. Excel began providing ASL in 2009.

**LanDo:** Lan do was founded in 1993. They are located in SF and started providing ASL services in 1999. There are 9 full time staff members with over 500 sub contractors all over the US.

**Accent:** Accent on Languages is located in Berkeley and was established In 1997. Before that, Ms. Kuipers had another company which she established in 1986. They provide services in all different languages. They started providing ASL about 7 years ago. They have combined about interpreters 200 locally, and more in other locations. Currently they are focused on local and state contracts.

#### **2. Please tell us a bit more about your agency.**

- **What led you to decide to add ASL to your services?**
- **What type of contracts you have which require ASL interpreters.**
- **Does anyone on your staff sign well enough to communicate with Deaf / Hard of Hearing consumers?**
- **What professional organizations relevant to ASL interpreters and the Deaf community are you a member of?**

**IEC:** Began providing ASL for personal and business reasons. His sister became blind and it was a learning experience to see how handicapped people function. Two weeks after his sister went blind, he got a call from Contra Costa County requesting an ASL interpreter. He Didn't know much at the time and understands the concerns of the community. Twenty years later, it is still a learning experience. Providing ASL has been a great endeavor. He is impressed with the affection among the Deaf/interpreting community. He wants to participate and do his best to serve the Deaf community. No one on staff can sign, but he has hired an interpreter to come and teach the staff sign language starting in March.

**Excel:** When government agencies put contracts out for bids, they want all the languages in one contract, a one stop shop. Ms. Saephon has lobbied government agencies to separate out ASL, but to no avail. DMV, CSR, OAH, are three contracts they have that require ASL but there are few requests. So Excel is forced to provide ASL. It has been a huge challenge. At one point Excel wanted to bid on a 1 week project hoping to get to know the interpreters and the community. Excel was awarded the contract but dealing with ASL interpreters was not a positive experience.

**LanDo:** in 1999 Lan Do bid on a state contract to provide services to the DMV. The contract required all languages be provided. They bid and won the contract so they had to provide ASL interpreters. Every time there is an ASL request, Lan Do becomes nervous. Many of the request are for legal settings. It often takes a lot of time to fill the request. She spends an immense amount of time looking for interpreters and/or referrals. If not successful, then she subcontracts with BACA. She always goes with certified Interpreters. She is doing the best she can.

**Accent:** From 1986 until about seven years ago there were no ASL requests. However, Alameda County was required to hire an agency in the same county to provide services so they approached Accent about a contract. Accent felt this was a challenge. There is a lot of distrust of her agency. It has required a lot of work to build a pool of interpreters. She has subcontracted with other agencies to get ASL interpreters. CMAS (California Multiple Award Schedule). They are a member of RID.

### **3. What has your experience been working with ASL interpreters?**

**IEC:** Very impressed with ASL. It is difficult to interpret spoken language into sign. His experience is that sign language interpreters (SLIs) are very ethical, especially when taking work. The commitment from the interpreters to the Deaf community is phenomenal. He experiences skepticism from the community and understands why.

**Excel:** There has been a lot of resistance and difficulty. Ms. Saephan has no relationship with Deaf organizations, so doesn't feel confident providing interpreters. She was yelled at by an ASL interpreter who said that the interpreters don't get work because of SLAs. Often interpreters don't respond to the calls/emails for requests. She feels interpreters don't want to be blacklisted by accepting work from SLAs. There is a sense of loyalty to ASL agencies.

**LanDo:** It takes a long time to fill the requests because she only looks for top interpreters. She relies on referrals. She has good relationships with the sign language agencies and has tremendous respect for SLIs because their work requires use of both their hands and mouth while spoken language interpreters only work with their mouths.

**Accent:** The commitment from the SLI surpasses that of other language communities. She doesn't feel like an expert in the area of ASL but wants to learn more. It is challenging is to find good interpreters that are available. Recently, Accent had a request for two day job and it was hard to find one interpreter that could do both days. Every interpreter could only do portions. She ended up sub contracting it to an ASL agency.

#### **4. Are you aware of the impact Spoken Language Agencies have had on the interpreting and Deaf communities?**

**IEC:** He received a link from Robin Mills about the question of agencies being certified. He feels it is necessary. He feels everyone here is committed to what they do. Many agencies don't screen interpreters; they just hire on the spot. But IEC is committed to providing quality service.

**Excel:** Excel has tried to form alliances with ASL agencies but feels they make it difficult. Fees and cancellation policies are unrealistic and outrageous. Excel knows that there is a feeling that the quality is being compromised because there is a lack of knowledge on the part of SLAs. Foreign language and ASL services don't differ much. Certification doesn't equate with being qualified. She knows that CI/CT has been around a lot longer. When she has tried to defer to ASL agencies, she has felt shut out. There is a positive attitude from the interpreters who are willing to work with her. Her business has been impacted because they have to spend many hours and days looking for ASL interpreters. Some SLAs are in it are just in it for the business. As the daughter of an immigrant, she understands the need for quality interpreters.

**LanDo:** Lan Do is not aware of the impact. She does not take ASL-only contracts. She asks friends/colleagues to help with ASL requests and now refers request to ASL agencies.

**Accent:** Accent has mixed feelings because the implication is that the impact is negative, and she doesn't see it that way. Before bidding and writing a proposal, she makes sure that she has the resources. She has reached out to interpreters in the area where the contracts are, but got a violent response from one person who owned a small agency herself. She feels she is providing work to interpreters.

#### **5. Hiring of ASL interpreters;**

- **How do you screen ASL interpreters?**
- **Do you have a minimum number of years experience and/or**
- **certification(s) requirement?**

**IEC:** The Deaf/ASL interpreting community is small and everyone knows each other. he feels that is the best screening process. He takes referrals. Sometimes consumers make recommendations.

**Excel:** Excel asks the requesting party the nature of the assignment. She tries to get all the details. Then she reaches out to the interpreter that seems to be the best match. If it is a legal assignment, she looks for someone with legal certification. But it is difficult. She doesn't hire anyone with a certification less than NAD III. She hopes that interpreters are honest when speaking of their qualifications. She knows that there needs to be some accountability. Foreign language interpreters also can't jump into a trial just because they have their legal certification. It takes time and experience. When interpreters decline to work with SLAs, they are declining to work with the people who need the services.

**LanDo:** Screening is hard for SLAs with such a small amount of requests for ASL. She doesn't formally screen. New interpreters usually are referred by current interpreters. Interpreters have a choice about working with LanDO. If she can't find an interpreter, she goes to a sign language agency. She is not trying to taking work away from the community but doing it to survive.

**Accent:** relies on referrals. She trusts that people are qualified. She only uses certified interpreters who have a minimum of several years of experience.

#### **6. Business practices;**

- What determines the rate you pay interpreters?

- Do ASL and spoken language interpreters get the same rate?
- Do all ASL interpreters get the same rate?
- What are your billing procedures? (2 hr. min, mileage, parking etc.)
- Can Deaf consumers request specific interpreters? If so, how?
- Can consumers get confirmation of their assigned interpreters?
- How do you match interpreters to assignments?
- What mechanism for feedback do you have? For interpreters? For Deaf consumers? For hearing consumers?
- Do you use CDIs? Do you know why CDIs would be used?
- Do you have working relationships with any ASL agencies? (i.e. do you ever subcontract?. If so, why?)
- What sets your agency apart in providing ASL services?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges you face in providing ASL services?

**IEC:** Yes, the pay scale is high, but ASL interpreters are worth the high rate. IEC pays mileage and parking when necessary, but IRS does not like independent contractors to get reimbursement from agencies. IEC sometimes gets requests, especially for gender. Sometimes in hospitals, the Deaf person requests a specific interpreter. ASL interpreters have more of a relationship with Deaf consumers and community.

We do match client and interpreter depending on the nature of the job, for example medical, legal, educational, etc. When forced to we'll use CDI's but it depends on the assignment. In terms of feedback, they rely on the client's feedback. The Deaf community is quick to criticize or compliment. IEC keeps track of feedback, especially in terms of preferences.

**Excel:** ASL interpreter rates are similar to spoken language. The rate changes with setting, for example legal, medical. Sometimes interpreters charge a partial day. Excel is willing to pay parking and mileage. ASL interpreters do get more than foreign language interpreters. And ASL interpreters know that FL agencies have a harder time finding ASL interpreters that are qualified. It is unclear what "certified interpreter" means. Does it mean, agency certifies or a national qualified body determines certification? She sees the problem in both spoken language and ASL world. We depend on our past experience with individual interpreters. We get as much information as possible. "Medical" can mean many things, so we ask for more information. We also provide the name of the interpreter when we assign the person to the job.

Feedback: Excel encourages all participants to provide feedback and follow up with the interpreter in terms of what worked, etc. It is not always possible, but they try to be available, thru email or phone calls. We ask about the interpreter's experience (background) and the different kinds of jobs they've accepted before.

The difficulty in working with ASL agencies is in regards to minimum hours and cancellation policies. Sometimes they just don't respond at all. But we've had a few working relationships with Bay Area sign agencies, but challenges with distance and resources. ASL is very small part of our business. We understand the Deaf community is small and close-knit. Right now, we're working on getting a CDI for a rural job. We used the RID website and referrals. The problem is that one person let her certification lapse, but the state requires certifications and they don't really understand "certified" either. To pick a particular person who is appropriate, depends on the details. What language? Are other advocates present? Etc. We try our best to pick the best interpreter possible with sensitivity.

**LanDo:** They ask the interpreter what they rate is. If they can afford it, they pay it. They are willing to pay out of pocket if the ASL interpreter charges more than what the contract pays. For Spanish, they bid low because the competition is high. Most of the time ASL interpreters get paid more than spoken language interpreters because there are less ASL interpreters available. They require NAD level 4 or CI/CT certification. The Deaf client can request. If she has a good relationship with a Deaf consumer, they can call her directly with problems. ASL interpreters can get confirmation through relay services. We match interpreter to nature of the assignment. For example, if it is a legal assignment, they use legally certified interpreters. If it is a conference, they use conference interpreters.

They do match interpreters with clients. In terms of feedback, they provide a form with all of the interpreters for evaluation. We hope that the client provides honest feedback. Most has been positive. Working with ASL agencies: we have a good relationship. We believe in networking because we have less experience with ASL assignments than the ASL agencies do. Good communication means having a qualified interpreters. It takes a lot of time to find one good ASL interpreter.

**Accent:** The rate for interpreters, spoken or ASL is generally the same but it varies. But language and qualifications/certifications do come into play. Most interpreters have their own rate. Some contracts allow the agency to pay a certain rate, and others don't. Accent uses a scale. A two hour is a minimum is the standard. Mileage and parking varies too. For ASL contracts they don't deal with the consumers directly, for example, when working with a social workers they ask that we try to be consistent. Sometimes there is a request for gender. But Accent has less choices because they don't have a large pool of interpreters. Again, they rely on the ethics of the interpreters.

They do match interpreter to the assignment. They try to find the best person for the job. Feedback: we ask our clients for feedback, we don't have contact with the consumer directly, only the client. For example, if interpreter is late, they let me know.

The only difference between ASL and spoken language is sub-contracting to another agency. It is never needed for spoken language assignments, but required sometimes for ASL jobs. We do not profit from sub-contracting. But the goal is to serve the community.

## **7. Community involvement**

- **How do you participate in the Deaf community?**
- **How do you give back to the Deaf community?**
- **How would you like the Deaf community to become involved? (or Do you see a way for the deaf community to be involved?)**

**IEC:** How to support the community: We are in negotiation with several large retailers to provide video interpreters on computers, free of charge. Also, providing dual language interpreting for travelers to other countries, using other languages than English. We have that advantage to provide both spoken language interpreters and ASL at the same time.

**Excel:** Again, there's been resistance. She knows as a SLA, the problem won't go away. Excel gives back by being visible--in her own immigrant community and giving back by serving on boards and volunteering. Excel wants to be a part of the ASL/Deaf communities, but the door has to be open. Excel is willing to support financially, too. As we experience challenges, maybe there's a point person to whom we can express our concerns, someone with better info and networking to guide us. Excel wants to learn more, be more involved, support the people we provide services for. It's the same for spoken lg clients, too. Please let Excel know how we they be more involved. When initially invited to the panel, Ms. Saephan was terrified to come. But when she showed up, she felt the vibe was positive. Excel will come to Deaf community events, just let her know.

**LanDo:** Lan do is not involved, but not from lack of effort. They work with ASL agencies from across California. When they received the invitation for the panel, they thought it was a great opportunity to meet the community. They look forward to more future opportunities. Maybe there can be a gathering with spoken language interpreters. They hope to be welcomed into the community. The goal is not money, but providing the best service.

**Accent:** Accent does not participate in the Deaf community. They have tried to set up meetings, but that's been challenging. This panel is the first time. Every year, Accent has a gathering at Christmas. It's an opportunity for all the different language interpreters meet. ASL interpreters have been invited, but this last time there was no response. This should change. More communication is needed. Accent wants to

support the Deaf community and provide the best service. Accent wants to be more involved with the Deaf community and have more open communications.

**8. How can we work together to improve the quality of the provision of ASL interpreting services? For example, the quality of interpreters has declined over the years, one reason being is the rate getting pushed down. How can we work together to remedy this situation?**

**IEC:** We haven't raised our rates in 5 yrs. ASL rates are high, but comparable to the market. I would like to see more improvement in medical terminology. It's not standard in ASL.

**Excel:** The goal is to Improve the quality: If ASL only agencies feel that they are the most competent, Excel is open to that. But it has to be a positive compromise. It is difficult for the SLAs to follow all of the policies of the ASL agencies.

There are some SLA who bid for ASL only contracts, and Excel is willing to not do that. Once excel got a contract, but the ASL interpreters tried to sabotage them. It worked out in the end because the committee picked the interpreters. Excel is happy to support speaking to the government agencies to separate ASL and spoken language needs. So far, it hasn't worked.

**LanDo:** Tries to improve all the time. Lan Do doesn't lower rates. They follow the rate given by the individual interpreter. They will ask if the interpreter can lower the rate, but if not, Lan Do accepts the rate quoted. Lan Do agrees with EXCEL: if we can convince the state to separate spoken language and ASL jobs, they would be in support of that.

**Accent:** Accent made a decision that they will never pursue an ASL only contract. If the government is willing to work with multiple agencies, Accent is willing to let ASL requests go to ASL agencies. Accent charges less now than 10 yrs ago. Governments take the lowest bidder. If agencies lower rates, they want ASL interpreters to understand that's how they win the contract.

**AUDIENCE QUESTIONS:**

**1) Vadim:** Shared a personal experience with IEC and Lan Do. He had appointment at the DMV in SF and no interpreter showed up. he He made second appointment and again, no interpreter showed up. He had to use VRS to complete the appointment. It was a bad experience.

Another time he was at hospital and called IEC directly to let them know he had a preferred interpreter. The Deaf consumer should have more a voice in who their interpreter is.

LanDo responded that they did not have the DMV contract at that time.

IEC responded that the problem is HIPPA and there is often a misunderstanding about HIPPA. Agencies struggle to get the name of the patient. They ask if there is a preference but the name is not always given. The patient needs to communicate their preferences with the hospital. Often too, the request is coming from a call center and not the nurse or doctor themselves. if the information is available, they try to honor it.

Excel commented that state agencies have penalties in place when the requests aren't filled. Also they know that a Canadian agency took over the DMV contract and they were not qualified. Excel now has the NorCal DMV contract. They do their best to honor preferences, but often the interpreter isn't in their pool and so they ask that consumer to contact the interpreter.

2) Tom Holcomb- expected to see monsters on the stage but admitted he was clearly wrong. He learned a lot and could tell all the representatives are committed to their work. We all want quality services provided and received. He wanted the agencies to know that while they assume the services they provide are adequate, they are not. Often Deaf people don't know how to follow up. Maybe a evaluation card could be given to the Deaf person at the end of every job. This should be required.

IEC responded saying that that is a good suggestion.

Excel understands this concern as well.

Accent commented that it doesn't matter if it is spoken language or not, they try to honor requests too and to get feedback. In Social Services they get the name and a case number. When working with social services they ask the interpreter rather than the agency if they are able to come back for future appointment.

3) Susie Kahl- Sometimes I am sent to a mental health job and I ask if the consumer is 5150 and often agencies don't understand what that means. Maybe the Deaf person isn't violent but the people in the room are and it can be scary. My experience is that IEC dispatchers don't understand what a 5150 is and it is a problem

IEC responded that he was surprised because the dispatchers are familiar with 5150s. He asked that Susie let him know who she is talking about. She said she knows all 4 dispatchers and she had to explain to each of them what it means.

4) David Weiss- he knows that it is a trend for agencies to fill jobs with “warm bodies”. As an example, Sign Language People tend to hire uncertified interpreters. Uncertified interpreters are taking work when they should not be. Deaf people prefer certified interpreters because they work harder. Certified interpreters need to work twice as hard when they are teamed with uncertified interpreters. So there needs to be something in place other than referrals, there needs to be a true screening process. We need quality services

IEC responded and agreed; there is a big difference between certified and uncertified interpreters. Further, there are different levels of certification. Teamwork is extremely important. .

Excel-Concurred and added that there are different skills needed for different settings. But as far as teams, if I am working w someone that is not as qualified even if they are certified then I will work harder. I try to make sure that my staff understands the challenges so they can work accordingly.

5) Priscilla Moyers-I am here as a consumer and interpreter and I feel the same as David Weiss. I'm very frustrated. I feel that the work needs to go back to the sign language agencies. SLA still don't know about the history of this profession. It is a lot to learn quickly but we don't want to have to wait 20 more years for SLA to catch up.