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## Sex is not a Four Letter Word (A Sexual Signs Workshop)

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### J. Duffer Childrey

In the field of interpreting, as in other professional fields, there is always continuing education with new instruction available, new areas of interest, and new skills to be mastered. Such continuing educational opportunities are sought and avidly pursued by the majority of professional interpreters and, consequently, the past decade has seen interpreters progress from "good signers" to certified professionals. Fast on the heels of certification has followed specialized interpreting, e.g., religious, educational, and most recently, legal interpreting.

With the publication of *Signs of Sexual Behavior* by James Woodward (T.J. Publishers, 1979) a new challenge for interpreter training is upon us—sexual signs. Sexual signs are not new; as with any behavior, because it exists, there also exists the language with which to discuss the behavior. Sexual signs appear to be new to most interpreters because, although they have been shared among deaf people, they have been taught to very few hearing people. This is acknowledged by Mr. Woodward in the opening pages of his book, and it is verified by the many interpreters who, in the absence of a repertoire of sexual signs, have used finger-spelling, pointing, and slang gestures in an effort to convey sexual information between deaf and hearing people.

Understanding and accepting the reluctance of deaf people to share sexual signs with hearing people, it is gratifying that such sharing has

occurred. Now it is important for interpreters to respond to this demonstration of camaraderie, and to learn sexual signs, using this acquired knowledge in more effective service to deaf consumers.

The most competent and effective interpreter is one who is knowledgeable and comfortable in a given situation, whether medical, educational, legal, or vocational. Do not misunderstand this apparently simplistic statement; the implication is not that in order to interpret a legal situation, the interpreter should be a lawyer. Rather, the implication is that there is more to the art of interpreting than the flawless delivery of signs. The broader the information base, the more capably the interpreter can facilitate communicative exchanges.

Sex is here to stay, communicatively speaking. There now exists an openness about sexuality which extends beyond the parameters of approbation and has diffused into all areas of today's society. Though as recently as ten to fifteen years ago sex was considered anathema to polite discourse, it is now an acceptable subject for discussion and, by consensus, our present value system has endorsed agencies that provide sexual information and counseling, improved medical treatments for sexual dysfunctions, and educational programs that offer instruction on sexual anatomy, physiology, and practices. We endorse mass media with its milieu of articles, television programs, and

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movies containing sexual material. The symbiotic integration of human sexuality into the fabric of daily existence places an added responsibility on interpreters. As language facilitators, with the business of communication their "turf", they must not only be highly adept but be able to command appropriate and specific vocabulary for each area of human activity and involvement.

Acknowledging that signs for sexual behavior are now available and agreeing that interpreters must exhibit a progressive professional attitude toward acquiring sexual signing skills, what is an effective training approach? I would suggest a Sexual Signs Workshop and I would like to share information on one such workshop recently hosted by the North Central Texas Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Eastfield College of the Dallas County Community College District.

### Objectives

The Sexual Signs Workshop was designed to provide area interpreters the basic training necessary to skillfully and appropriately interpret sexual information from sign to voice (receptively) and from voice to sign (expressively). Offered as a skill-building experience, the workshop encompassed three areas of learning—intellectual, attitudinal, and mechanical. Intellectual learning is what we label as academic learning; attitudinal learning is designated as behavioral learning; and mechanical learning is termed skill learning. Because each of the three areas is contiguous, they were addressed via a trans-situational approach.

We began the workshop recognizing certain basic tenets regarding the participants:

1. that each participant functions as a sexual/social being, possessing a pre-entry level of information about sexual terminology, functioning and activity and;
2. coupled with such information are attitudinal and behavioral responses to sexuality. While the primary objective of the workshop was to provide instruction, secondary objectives included becoming more knowledgeable about sexual informa-

tion and feeling more comfortable when interpreting in situations requiring explicit sexual language.

### Methodology

Encompassing vicarious as well as experiential participation, the workshop began with a series of desensitization exercises and followed with:

1. Videotaped sign demonstration;
2. Instruction (medical and anatomical definitions, regional variances in sign structure, systematic formational components of sexual signs and examples of usage);
3. Videotaped simulated interpreting situations (legal, medical, educational, counseling);
4. Roleplaying;
5. Evaluation.

The entire workshop was conducted via total communication and presenters, deaf and hearing, are professionals with training in human sexuality. The sign instructor is a trained counselor, himself deaf, and he was deliberately chosen as the instructor in order to reinforce the fact that sexual signs originated with and for the deaf populace. All videotapes were made using professionals, deaf consumers, and an interpreter with comprehensive skills certification, a good command of sexual signs, and a wholesome non-judgemental attitude towards the topics under discussion.

A wrap-up session allowed participants time to clarify information, to more informally interact with the workshop presentors, and to complete evaluation instruments.

Data obtained from the evaluation revealed that

- the workshop met expectations regarding the acquisition of sexual signing skills.
- the desensitization exercises were crucial to individual participation and facilitated both oral and signed communication.
- the videotapes contributed significantly to the effectiveness of the instruction.
- the role-playing and utilization of deaf consumers, interpreters, professional counselors, and evaluators was appropriate to the

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objectives of the workshop. the participants, unanimously, would recommend such a workshop to other professional interpreters, signers, and deaf people.

In closing, I would like to repeat that the

text *Signs of Sexual Behavior* was an invaluable resource for the workshop. May I take this opportunity to thank the author, James Woodward, and to commend him for his valuable contribution to the world of deafness.