THE COMMUNITY INTERPRETER'S TASK:

Self –Perception and Provider Views (1999)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franz Pöchhacker is Associate Professor of Interpreting Studies in the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna.

Empirical research and lectures in conference, media, healthcare interpreting.

- Introducing Interpreting Studies (Routledge, 2004/2016)

- Interpreting. International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting

- Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies (Routledge, 2015)

THE INTERPRETER'S ROLE

The Vienna survey

- Defining the community interpreter's role
- Over 600 service providers in Vienna hospitals
- 32 interpreters (spoken and of sign language)
- Questionnaire: 9 selected tasks
- Is interpreting «just translating»?

ABSTRACT

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

A pressing issue

- Community interpreting: a novelty in some countries

- The need for professionals

- The nature and limits of the community interpreter's task – equal at any stage

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

A pressing issue

- Gentile et al. (1996), Liaison Interpreting: A Handbook: entire chapter on the interpreter's role

- Wadensjö (1992): professional lack a firm stance on the interpreter's role

- Roberts (1997: 20): understanding the role as a key requisite for professionalization

INTRODUCTION

THE DEFINITION

Different opinions

- Who does the job?

- What code of practice?

- Implicit norms of translational behaviour and client expectations

- Provider's views and interpreters' self-perception

INTRODUCTION

DEMANDS AND ASPIRATIONS

Roles and Tasks

- Gentile: how to define behaviour requirements?

- Ad hoc interpreters

  Linguistic conduit   Advocate/Broker

  INTERPRETER

- Putsch and Barsky: Intepreters as intercultural agents between provider and client

- «Just translating» is impossible, too many differences

THE INTERPRETER'S ROLE

Cairncross (1987: 7): notion of *cultural interpreter*

- Faithful mouthpiece
- Representative and advocate

UNCLEAR

Anderson (1976: 216f):

«the interpreter's **role** is always partially **undefined** – that is, the role prescriptions are objectively inadequate… The interpreter's position is also characterized by **role overload**. Not only is it seldom entirely clear what he is to do, he is also frequently expected to do **more that is objectively possible**.»

Roberts (1997: 20f)

- When should the interpreters step out of their specific role?

THE INTERPRETER'S ROLE

GOAL OF THE SURVEY

Gathering empirical data

- Tasks: pertaining to and beyond relaying and coordinating in mediated talk

- No abstract labels like *conduit, clarifier, culture broker, helpmate, agent, advocate etc.*

- Question items from the literature on:

1. Professional ethics

2. Interpreter's standards of practice

THE INTERPRETER'S ROLE

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Material

Method

Results

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Questionnaire

- **Providers** had to answer the question: **"Does the TASK of interpreters in communication with non-German-speaking clients ALSO include..."**

- **Interpreters** had to answer the question: **"In your view, does your TASK as interpreter ALSO include..."**

The word **client** refers only to the minority-language speaker.

Both the questions were followed by nine items to be answered with "**yes**" or "**no**"

- *Editing tasks*

1. Simplifying technical language for the clients;

2. Explaining technical terms for the clients;

3. Summarizing clumsy long utterances of the clients;

4. Omitting utterances which are not to the point to avoid losing time;

- *Tasks beyond relaying*

5. Explaining foreign cultural references and meanings;

6. Clarifying indeterminate statements by immediate follow-up questions to the clients;

7. Alerting parties to any misunderstanding in the conversation;

8. Asking questions and giving information at the request of the provider;

9. Filling in forms with the clients.

Providers

765 questionnaires: distributed in 12 Vienna hospitals to **doctors**, **nurses** and **therapists** in different medical departments. (response rate of 66.4%)

151 questionnaires: distributed to **social workers** in the District Offices for Youth and Family Affairs of the City of Vienna. (response rate of 80%)

Total **response rate of 68.7 %**

Interpreters

16 spoken language interpreters in the same settings were interviewed in individual or group sessions. (September 1996 in Vienna)

16 sign language interpreters from all over Austria with work experience in health care were asked to fill in the questionnaire.(early 1997 in Graz)

Spoken language interpreters
16 persons were interviewed:
 6 native-language interpreters for Turkish patients;
 5 interpreters assigned full-time to family affairs offices;
 5 bilingual hospital staff serving *ad hoc* as in-house interpreters.

Very important: **None** of these interpreters **had received any training** in interpreting at the time of the study.

Respondents

Study population

Providers
- Doctors: mostly male (2:1 ratio)
- Nurses, therapists and social service providers: mostly female

Average age: 35-40 years
Work experience:12/13 years on average.

Interpreters
☐ The 16 spoken language interpreters were mostly male (14 males -2 females)
☐ The 16 sign language interpreters were mostly female (13 females – 3 males)

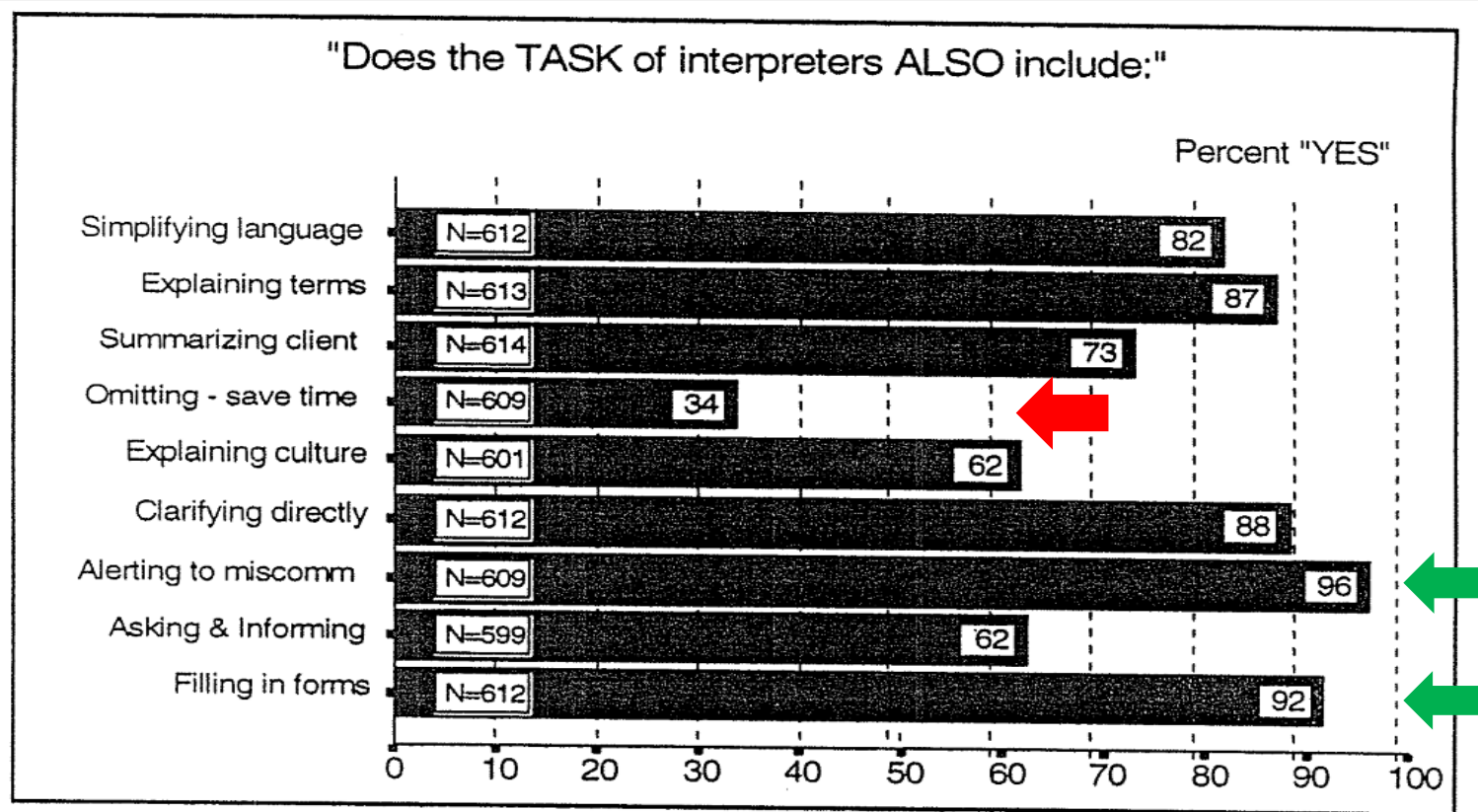Average age: 38 (spoken language int.) vs. 32 (sign language int.)
Level of education: only 1 vs. 4 without secondary school-leaving certificate.

In general the **numbers of males and females were sufficiently balanced**.

Provider views

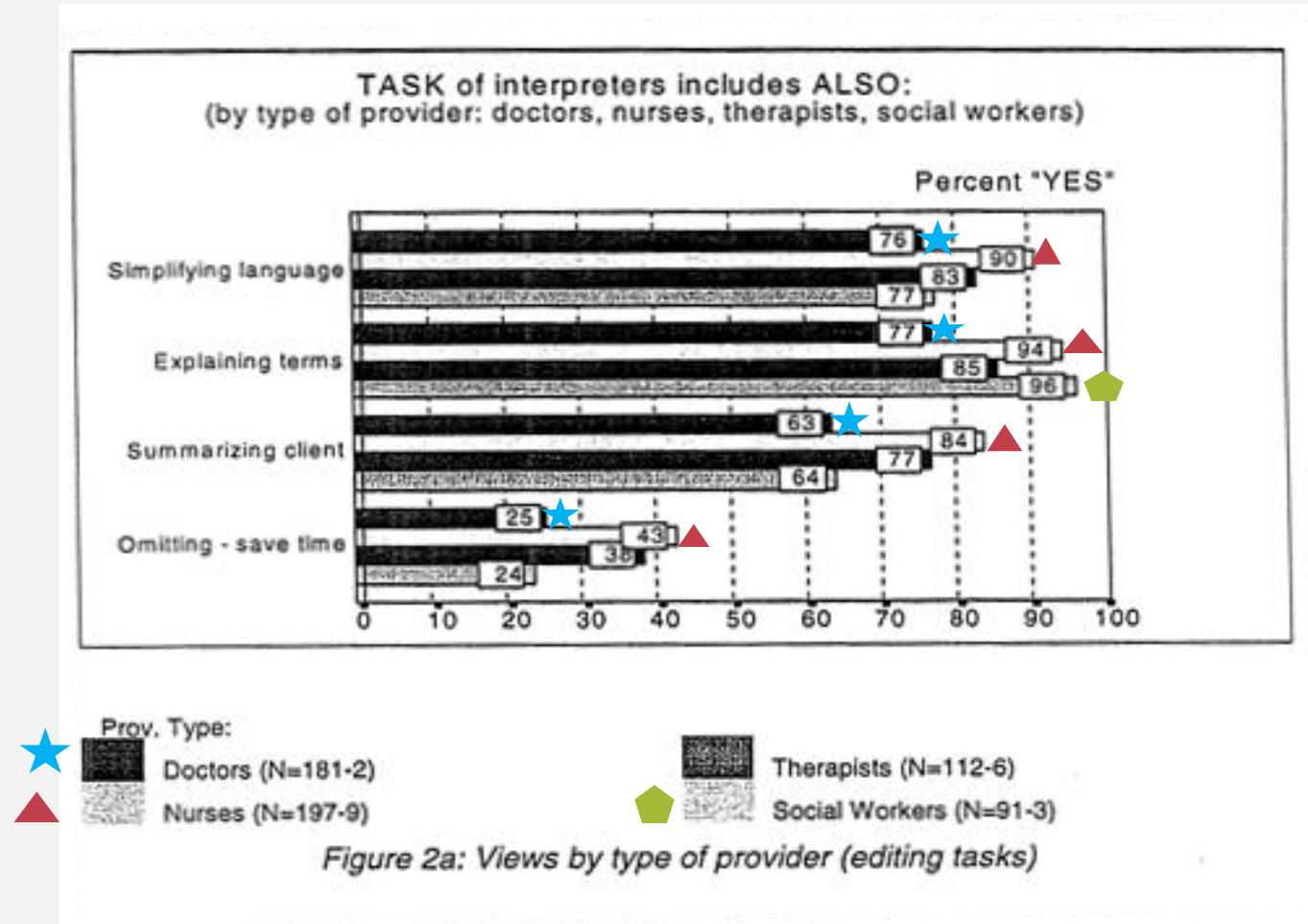"Does the TASK of interpreters ALSO include:"

Percent "YES"

Task	N	Percent
Simplifying language	N=612	82
Explaining terms	N=613	87
Summarizing client	N=614	73
Omitting - save time	N=609	34
Explaining culture	N=601	62
Clarifying directly	N=612	88
Alerting to miscomm	N=609	96
Asking & Informing	N=599	62
Filling in forms	N=612	92

Figure 1: Provider views on the scope and limits of the interpreter's task

Provider views broken down by type

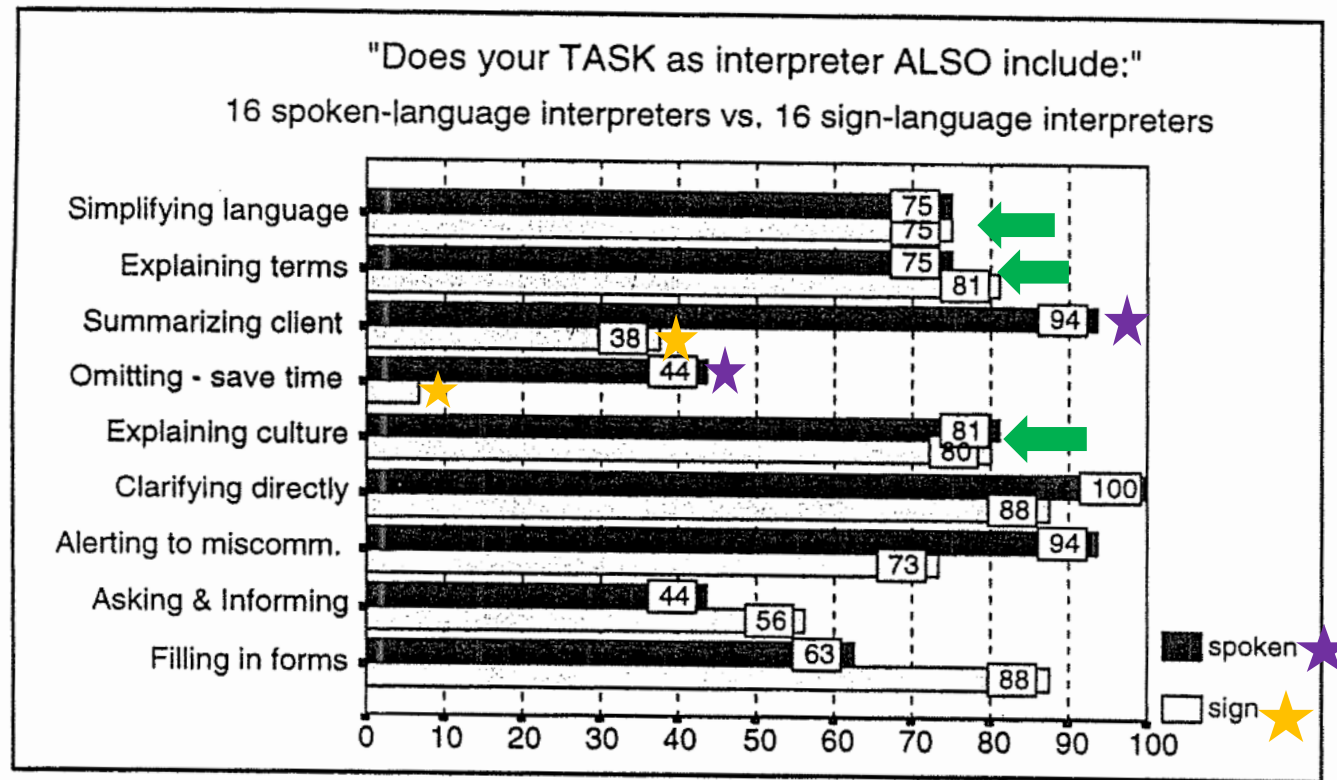
Figure 2a: Views by type of provider (editing tasks)

Provider views broken down by type

Figure 2b: Views by type of provider (tasks beyond relaying)
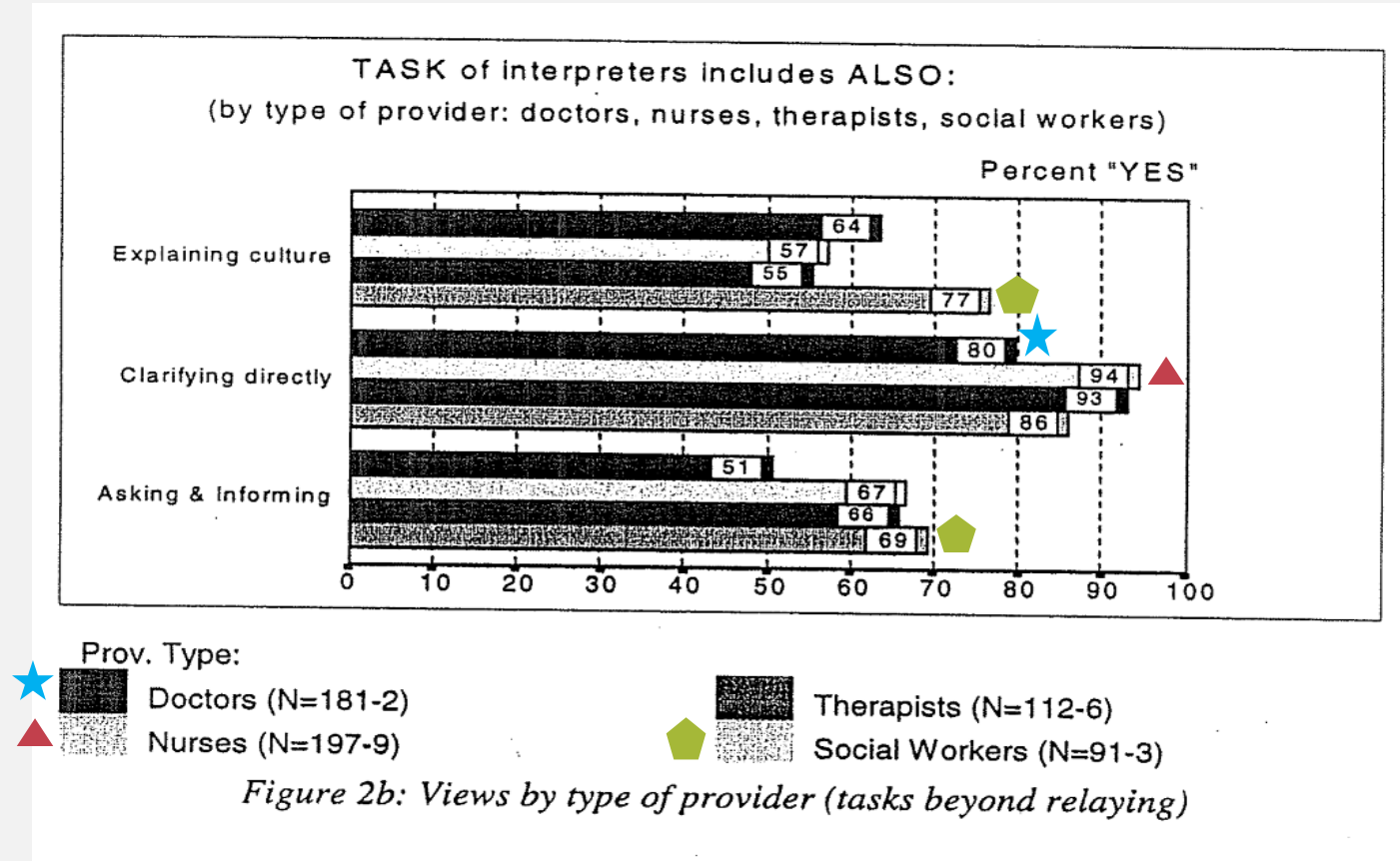
Interpreters' views

spoken language vs. sign language

"Does your TASK as interpreter ALSO include:"

16 spoken-language interpreters vs. 16 sign-language interpreters
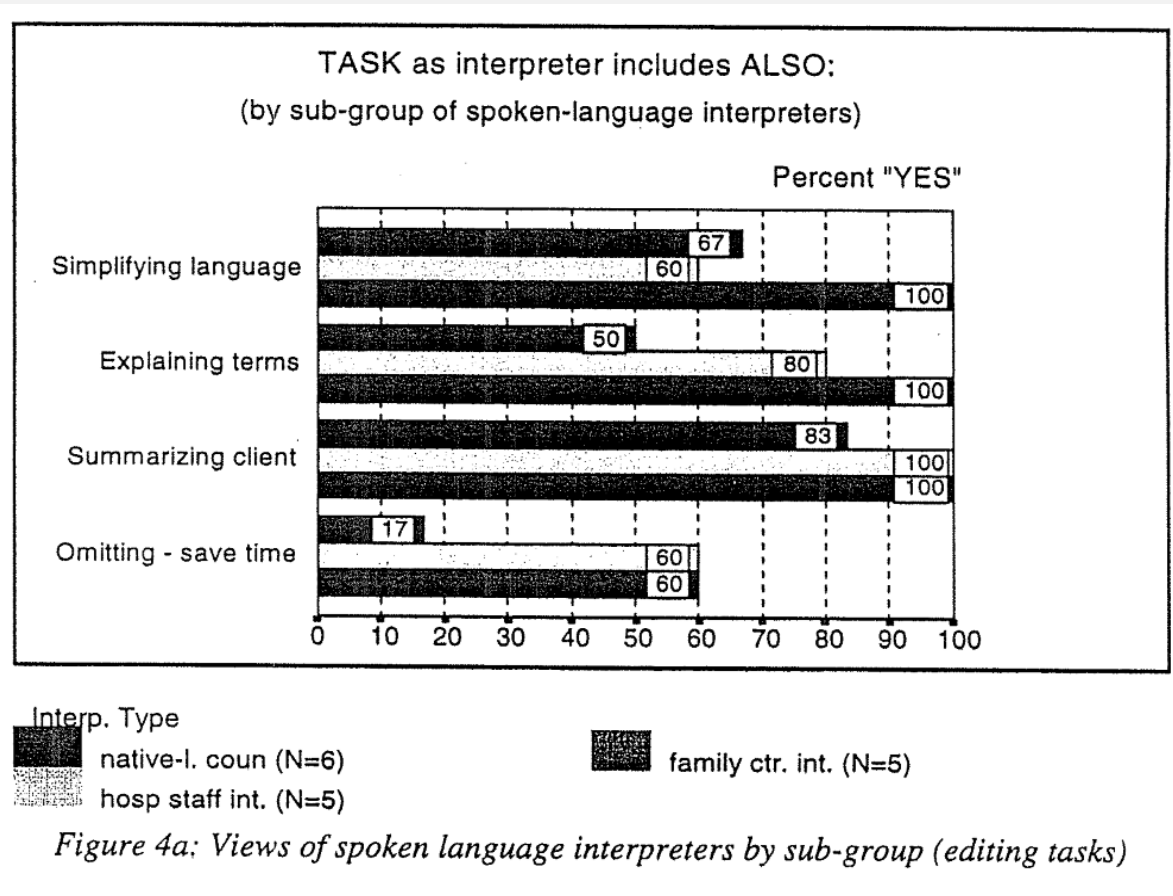
Figure 3: Interpreters' views on the scope and limits of their task

Views of spoken language interpreters by sub-group

Editing tasks

Figure 4a: Views of spoken language interpreters by sub-group (editing tasks)

Views of spoken language interpreters by sub-group
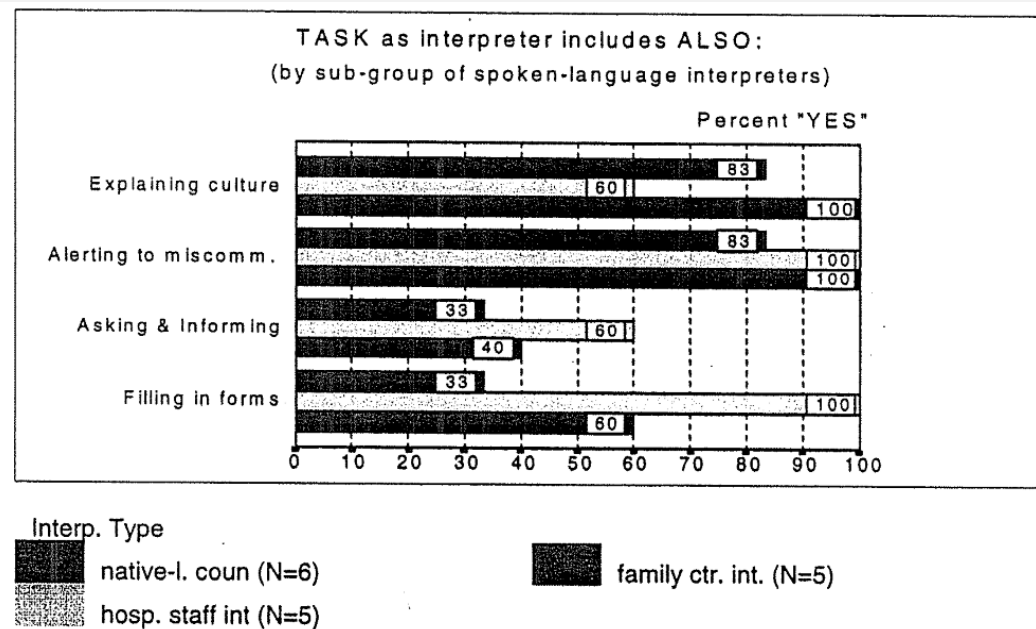
Tasks beyond relaying

Figure 4b: Views of spoken language interpreters by sub-group (tasks beyond relaying)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

"The role of the community interpreter today is ill-defined or, more commonly, too vast" – Roberts (1997:20)

The issue of what an interpreter is or should be expected to do requires as much as clarification as the question of how the scope and limits of the interpreter's task are defined by untrained mediators

- Users of the community interpreting services expect interpreters to do much more than "just translate"
- Broad license = editing tasks: adapting utterances, abridging utterances by clients, discourse co-ordinating tasks
- Service providers would like the interpreter to fill in forms with clients and explain foreign cultural meanings
- Interpreter's task construed broadly: clarifier, explainer, cultural mediator, helpmate and agent

Self-Perception and Provider Views

- Respondents: facilitating comprehension for the client, enhancing the provider's understanding of the foreign cultural background, ensuring an efficient flow of interaction

- Interpreters: willing to act as cultural mediators by *Explaining foreign cultural references and meanings*

Self-Perception and Provider Views

- Hospital setting: service providers and staff members act as *ad hoc* interpreters, native language counselors adopt more restricted view of their task
- Social service setting: comparison between the provider and interpreter perspectives highlights the family center interpreter's broad perception of their task

CONCLUSION

- Interpreting = multi-faceted task beyond "mere translation"
- Interpreters shown to share an expansive view of their role
- Finds presented best seen as an exploratory attempt