

Rolling with the Punchlines:

Humor Analysis for Sign Language Interpreters

Melanie A. Best

Sign Language Interpreting Program, Augustana University

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Melanie Best at

[Mabest13@ole.augie.edu](mailto:Mabest13@ole.augie.edu)

### Abstract

Deaf and Hearing cultures perceive humor differently due to linguistic and cultural differences. Interpreters must work with the English language and sign language to reproduce a joke so that it is culturally appropriate and understandable. Along with language, interpreters must recognize the distinctive characteristics of both cultures' categories of humor. The author begins by defining each category of humor. Then the manner in which both cultures produce their humor is described. Next, the different aspects of humor, such as vocal and visual cues, laughter, timing, function, and benefit are examined. Finally, the author explores the importance of interpreters learning the differences between the two cultures' humor and how this knowledge can be beneficial.

### *Key words*

*Deaf Culture, Deaf Humor, Hearing Culture, communication mix-ups, technical difficulties, Hearing culture's humor, punctuation effect, dynamic equivalence*

### Rolling with the Punchlines:

#### Humor Analysis for Sign Language Interpreters

In one of Bienvenu's (1989) speeches, she outlines how *Deaf Culture* and *Deaf Humor* are intertwined and influence each other. As part of her presentation she uses the following joke, which was translated into English by TBC news:

A huge giant is stalking through a small village of wee people, who are scattering through the streets trying to escape the ugly creature. The giant notices one particularly beautiful blonde woman scampering down the cobble-stoned street. He stretches out his clumsy arm and sweeps her up, then stares in wonder at the slight, shivering figure in his palm. "You are so beautiful," he exclaims. The young woman looks up in fear. "I would never hurt you," he signs, "I love you! We should get MARRIED." Producing the sign MARRY, he crushes her.  
(Bienvenu, 1989)

The punchline of this joke is the production of the sign *MARRY*<sup>1</sup> and the visualization that the giant has unintentionally crushed the beautiful woman in his hand while trying to sign to her. Since this joke is not understood by all, sign language interpreters are in a bind: If they clarify the joke to the audience, they risk ruining it. If they do not clarify the joke, the presenter's message may not be understood by everyone. This dilemma illustrates that although humor is found in every culture, it cannot always be easily interpreted to members of another culture.

People's understanding of humor is influenced by factors such as their knowledge of the culture and language surrounding the joke, their own culture, and their personal experience (Rutherford, 1983). *Hearing Culture* is the term used in Deaf Culture to identify the American

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<sup>1</sup> Words that are capitalized are used to show that the word is a sign from American Sign Language (ASL).

mainstream culture that is comprised mostly of people who can hear and choose to communicate using a spoken language (Holcomb, 2013a). The differences between the two cultures – Deaf and Hearing – will be examined; including what each culture sees as humorous, how humor is produced, and aspects of humor. It is essential that interpreters possess the basic knowledge and recognize the difference aspects of humor found in the two cultures in order to reproduce it in a manner that is understandable to either culture.

### **Categorizing Humor**

The crucial first step in understanding the differences between Deaf and Hearing Cultures' humor is to have a basic knowledge of what the cultures find to be funny. One indication of a culture's perception of humor can be found by how that culture categorizes it. The following section examines how both cultures categorize their humor.

#### **Deaf Culture Humor Categories**

Holcomb (2013b), an individual from the Deaf community, has stated that humor in Deaf Culture can be split into four distinct categories: Deaf-experience humor, Deaf Culture humor, American Sign Language (ASL) humor, and Visual humor.

Deaf-experience humor includes humorous anecdotes of universal situations that most of the audience has either encountered or heard about. The experiences depicted in this kind of humor typically involve *communication mix-ups* or *technical difficulties*. A typical communication mix-up is when a Deaf signer tries to communicate with a non-signer, either a Hearing person<sup>2</sup> or another deaf person<sup>3</sup>. Technical difficulties occur in stories about hearing aid malfunctions or incidents dealing with societal and peer pressure to get cochlear implants (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). An example of this kind of humor can be seen in Figure 1, which illustrates one experience that Deaf or hard of hearing people have when they wear hearing aids. Sometimes they do not realize that their hearing aids are making noises. They

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<sup>2</sup> A Hearing person is someone who can hear and main mode of communication is speaking.

<sup>3</sup> For Deaf culture there is a difference between a Deaf (capital "D") and a deaf (lower case "d") person. A Deaf person has a hearing loss, uses sign language, is involved with the other Deaf people, and advocates for Deaf culture. A deaf person has a hearing loss, but chooses not to communicate using sign language or be directly involved with Deaf people.

might see the people reacting to them, but may be unaware of what is happening until someone tells them (Daigle, 2015).



According to Holcomb (2013b), Deaf Culture humor is the equivalent of telling a joke in Hearing Culture. One characteristic of joke telling in Hearing Culture is the punchline. A punchline does not always exist in Deaf humor, adding to the confusion of Hearing people watching a joke being signed (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). Deaf jokes that contain a noticeable punchline are categorized into Deaf Culture humor (Holcomb, 2013b). A well-known joke repeatedly told in Deaf Culture is the story about a deaf couple staying the night in a hotel:

A deaf couple are on a road trip. They get tired and decide to pull over and spend the night in a hotel. They check in and the wife goes to sleep right away. The husband wants a drink, so he leaves the room to find a vending machine. Upon returning, he finds that he has forgotten which room he is in. Unsure of what to do, he gets an idea. He goes to the car, opens the door and honks the horn loud. The lights in every hotel room, save one, turn on. Aha! He thinks. He has found his wife! (Quixotic Deaf, 2007).

This joke's punchline is when the husband hits the car horn, causing all the lights in the hotel to go on, except one. The husband knows that the one room without a light is his room because his wife is Deaf and cannot be woken up by the loud car horn. Since a punchline can be easily understood by both cultures, it fits in the Deaf Culture humor category.

Jokes that fall under the ASL Humor categories are inside jokes that are only understood if someone has an understanding of ASL (Holcomb, 2013b). In this category, humor usually takes the form of sign play, similar to wordplay in English. Sign play is when a parameter<sup>4</sup> of the sign is changed. For example, the signed expression *UNDERSTAND A LITTLE* is based on of the sign *UNDERSTAND*. In ASL *UNDERSTAND* is normally produced by flicking the index finger up (see Figure 2a). When the expression *UNDERSTAND A LITTLE* is signed, the location, palm orientation, and movement remain the same. The only thing that changes is the handshape being used. Instead of producing the sign with the index finger, the signer uses the pinky finger (see Figure 2b). By using the smallest finger, rather than the bigger index finger, the signer is showing he or she somewhat understands the information. *UNDERSTAND A LITTLE* is funny because it plays with the sizes of fingers to show various degrees of understanding (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012).

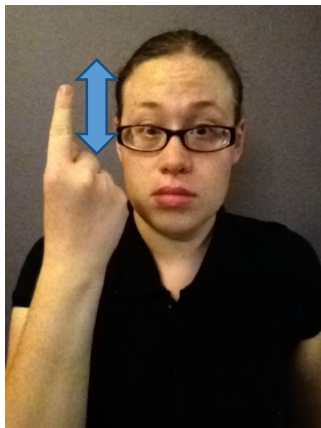


Figure 2a

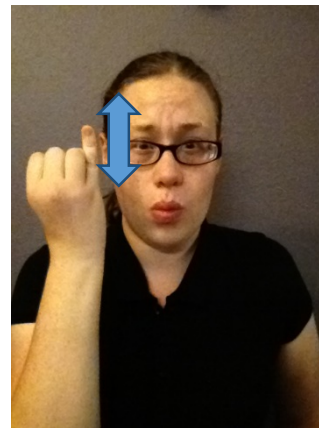


Figure 2b

*The signer is producing the signs UNDERSTAND (2a) and UNDERSTAND ALITTLE (2b). The arrows are used to show the movement of the index and pinky finger.*

Holcomb referred to the final category as visual humor. According to him, visual humor “... takes advantage of the graphic visual properties of American Sign Language to make humorous stories even funnier” (p. 165). Visual humor relies on exaggerated facial expressions, descriptions, or mocking characterization of one’s manner of communication style (Holcomb, 2013b). An example of this can be found in a YouTube Video called *ASL Storytelling: The Deaf*

<sup>4</sup> According to Valli, Lucas, Mulrooney, and Villanueva (2011) parameters are the basic aspects of a language that combine to form a word or sign. In ASL there are five parameters. Location is the area in which the sign is produced. Handshape is how the fingers are positioned. Movement is the motion of the sign. Palm Orientation is which way the palm faces. One type of nonmanual signals is facial expressions that accompanies a sign.

*Hulk* posted by Letsgofly08 (2010). In this video, the presenter tells a story about a Deaf middle school student who is bullied by students and teachers alike because of his Deafness. At one point the presenter impersonates the Deaf student's hearing English teacher by squinting his eyes, wrinkling his nose, wagging his finger, and opening and closing his mouth quickly to show meaningless talking. The presenter is using his facial expressions to impersonate and caricature the hearing English teacher in the story in a manner intended to be humorous (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012).

### **Hearing Culture Humor Categories**

*Hearing culture's humor* is separated into three categories: relief, incongruity, or superiority (Meyer, 2000). Meyer (2000) describes a fourth category, however, as it is any combination of the three categories, it is not given a separate title.

Humor considered to be in the relief category includes jokes that build up tension and release it. The sudden release in tension is supposed to cause the audience to feel a sense of relief. Jokes that are told with the purpose of breaking existing tension in a room or in a conversation also are a part of this group (Meyer, 2000). The popular "Who's on First?" skit performed by Bud Abbot and Lou Costello is an example of relief humor (Abbot & Costello). It is a skit about a baseball player who joining a new team and is asking his new manager the names of his new teammates. Unfortunately, the other players have some strange nicknames that cause miscommunication between the new baseball player and the manager. With each repeated question and answer, the temper of both characters rises along with the comic tension felt by the audience. The tension breaks at the end when the new baseball player finally gives up out of frustration (Abbott & Costello). This skit has the building up and releasing of tension that is a characteristic of relief humor (Meyer, 2000).

The focus of incongruity humor is to end in a manner that is unexpected causing the audience laughs because they are surprised (Meyer, 2000). An example of incongruity humor would be an anti-joke: when someone starts off telling a well-known joke but ends in a manner that is unanticipated (Straus, 2014). In Hearing culture, the following joke might be seen as an anti-joke. *Why was six afraid of seven? It wasn't. Numbers are not sentient and thus incapable of feeling fear.* (Dunn, 2005). This particular anti-joke starts off similar to its common joke rendition however, it does not end in the traditional way, "because seven eight nine," in which

the word “eight” is a play on the word “ate.” The unexpected change in the conventional answer is funny despite the fact this new punchline is not funny (Straus, 2014).

In the superiority category, humor is experienced when the audience feels better about themselves due to another person’s ignorance or mistakes (Meyer, 2000). Superiority humor is customarily used by comedians. One such illustration is when the comedian and talk show host, Jimmy Kimmel, had his camera crew ask random people on the street if Obamacare was better than the Affordable Care Act. It was a trick question since they both are the same act, but the names are different, thus making it funny should a person chose one over the other. Much to the amusement of the audience, his crew found people who supported the Affordable Care Act over Obamacare (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2013). Since the audience knew there was no difference between the two acts, they felt superior to the people interviewed, and which is why they laughed at the responses that picked one act over the other.

Although each category has distinct characteristics, it is possible for a joke to have certain parts that will make it fall under more than one category (Meyer, 2000). For example, every year the comedian Ellen DeGeneres sends one of her cast members into a haunted house and films the cast member’s experience (TheEllenShow, 2013). The audience finds it funny because of the cast member’s unexpected responses to the haunted house, making it incongruity humor. It can also be superiority humor as some audience members might see the cast member’s reactions as too extreme for the situation, thus making the audience members feel braver and better than the cast member.

### **Producing Humor**

Besides differing in how to categorize humor, Deaf and Hearing Cultures have distinct ways of producing it. Deaf Culture often uses the language features of ASL to increase the visual appeal of the signed humor (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). Hearing Culture, on the other hand, uses acoustic differences, when attempting to be funny (Hoicka & Gattis, 2012). However, both cultures use facial expressions, body movements, and gestures when producing a humorous anecdote. A difference is that Deaf Culture tends to use more exaggerated expressions, movements, and gestures than Hearing Culture (Holcomb, 2013b).



### **Producing Deaf Culture humor**

**Classifiers, ABC stories, and number stories.** Deaf Culture frequently uses classifiers when signing something humorous (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). Jokes that rely heavily on classifiers could be classified under what Holcomb (2013b) called visual humor of Deaf Culture. According to Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2012), classifiers are “predicative signs that position and move a given handshape that reflects a property of the entity... to show the movement and locations of entities.” (p. 315). The purpose of classifiers in ASL is to make the meaning of the message more visually appealing for the audience by using a particular hand shape to represent the size, shape, and movement of a noun. ASL classifier handshapes include numbers and letters from the ASL alphabet and other handshapes. In Deaf Culture, there is a type of story called ABC stories, where only the ASL alphabet is used to tell a story. Each letter of the alphabet is a sign or a classifier. Number stories are similar to ABC stories but only use the ASL numbers as signs classifiers. One of the numerous ways ABC stories or number stories are used is to sign a joke about any topic the signer chooses (Valli, Lucas, Mulrooney, & Villanueva, 2011).

**Characterization.** Another way Deaf people produce jokes is by becoming the character, or characterization. There are times when Hearing Culture also uses characterization by a change in tone, voice, or pitch. In Deaf culture when the signer chooses to become a character, the signer uses his or her whole body to depict that character (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). The signer uses his or her body to mimic the stereotype of the character. When the signer becomes a character, it is assumed and understood by the audience that every movement – whether in the hands, body, mouth, head, or eyes – portrays the character moving not the signer. In ASL it is possible to become multiple characters at once, which can add to the humor. Hearing Culture accomplishes telling a joke with more than one character by a change of voice. Deaf Culture illustrates it through the use of role shifting, which is when the signer angles his or her body slightly so that the signer is not directly facing the audience (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012), see Figures 3a, 3b, 3c.

One way for a signer to distinguish between characters when role shifting is through eye gaze; the direction and angle at which a signer’s eyes are looking (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012), see Figures 3a, 3b, 3c. For example, if one of the characters is taller than the other, the signer’s eye would be gazing down just as if the signer were actually looking at someone who

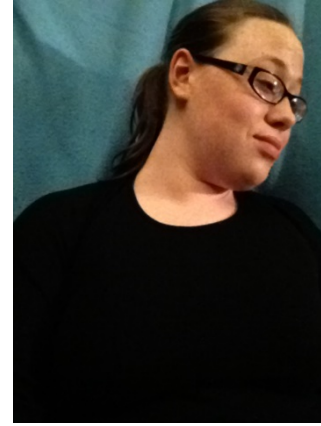
was shorter than them. In order to add to the humor of the more exaggerated actions, body postures, and facial expressions a signer uses the better (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012).



*Figure 3a*



*Figure 3b*



*Figure 3c*

*The signer is presenting some of the ways interpreters shift their body or focus their eyes to distinguish between different characters. In Figure 3a the signer has role shifted her body so that it is angled slightly to her right with her eyes looking upward. Figure 3b shows the signer in a neutral position, meaning her body is facing forward and her eye gaze is focused straight ahead of her. The signer in Figure 3c has role shifted her body so that it is angled slightly to her left with her eyes gazing downward.*

### **Producing Hearing Culture humor**

**Changes in Voice.** When a Hearing person tells a joke there is often a change in how he or she is speaking (Hoicka & Gattis, 2012). Hoicka and Gattis (2012), conducted a study that tested how a mother's voice changes when she read something funny to her child and found that mothers' voices changed in pitch when reading aloud something humorous. They attributed this to the fact that the mothers were smiling or in the process of smiling when their pitch changed. They also noticed that the mothers' voice would undergo a slight change in pitch in an effort to get their child's attention. Once the child recognized the change in pitch and started paying attention, the mother's speech would slow down which would give the child a chance to absorb the verbal stimuli and understand the words being spoken. The mother's voice would also increase in volume, which Hoicka and Gattis surmised that she wanted to be sure her child heard her as she read the joke.

### **Aspects of Humor**

Along with a basic understanding of how Deaf and Hearing Cultures categorize and produce humor, an interpreter should know aspects of humor in general. This kind of knowledge will be useful when in helping an interpreter know when a joke is being told. It could also assist

an interpreter in understanding the reason why a joke is being told. Here are a few aspects of humor that interpreters may find useful.

### **Vocal and Visual Cues**

Some main cues often provided by a person telling a joke are smiling, laughter, or a pause in which the person is expecting a reaction from the audience (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). Hoicka and Akhtar conducted an experiment that focused on how parents with young children could tell if their child was joking by how often the children were smiling, laughing, and looking up at them to gauge their reaction.

Hoicka and Akhtar (2012) found that children were more likely to laugh while looking up at the parents than smile when trying to gauge their parents' reaction. However, both of these cues occurred more frequently than when children laughed or smiled without looking at their parents. The data supports the idea that laughter is a more common indicator of the production of humor when compared to smiling. It also suggests that people will systematically look at another person's face to determine if their attempt at humor was successful or not. Interpreters can use this data as an assurance that if the presenter is laughing that means that most likely he or she is telling a joke. If it is possible for interpreters to see the presenter's face while telling the joke, the interpreter can be on the lookout for the presenter watching for a reaction (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012).

### **Laughter**

The data from Hoicka and Akhtar's research (2012) showed that laughter was more likely to be used by children as an indication that they had told a joke. When a presenter is talking or signing his or her laughter is anything but sporadic (Provine, 1996). Laughter can help interpreters know when a joke has been told and when the presenter is pausing between thoughts or ideas (Provine & Emmorey 2006).

Provine and Emmorey (2006) conducted a study on presenters who used English and on presenters who used ASL to see if the *punctuation effect* would determine where they chose to laugh. They defined punctuation effect as "... the tendency to laugh at places where punctuation would be placed in a transcript of a conversation." (p.404). The idea behind it was if the presenter chose to laugh at any point in the speech it would be when there was a pause between

ideas (Provine & Emmorey, 2006). Provine (1993) first tested the punctuation effect with presenters who spoke English. His results showed that the majority of the time these presenters laughed when there was a pause. Later, Provine and Emmorey replicated Provine's earlier experiment with Deaf presenters who signed their jokes. Provine and Emmorey's results showed that Deaf presenters also laughed more often when there was a break in their story. The results from these tests show that both Hearing presenters' and Deaf presenters' laughter is influenced by the punctuation effect (Provine & Emmorey, 2006). This means that both Deaf and Hearing presenters are more likely to laugh between thoughts. Interpreters can use the knowledge of the punctuation effect when helping them predict what the presenter is going to communicate or do next.

### **Timing**

Pausing between ideas maybe more than just the punctuation effect, it could be that the presenter is pacing the joke in order to make the delivery of the punchline more effective. Attardo and Pickering (2011) ran experiments to see if timing affects how people tell jokes and how those jokes are received by others. They examined the extent to which presenters paused or spoke faster when saying the punchline. According to their findings, the pauses that occurred in a joke were longer at the beginning of the joke than the slight pause that happened before the punchline. The researchers also discovered that the pace of a joke remained the same from beginning to end.

Attardo and Pickering's research (2011) of timing can be used by interpreters when they interpret for a Deaf presenter. They need to remember to keep the same pace throughout the joke. If interpreters wanted to add a pause before the punchline, they should be careful not to make it longer than the pauses used at the beginning of the joke (Attardo & Pickering, 2011). If interpreters incorporate pacing and pauses while reproducing the Deaf presenter's joke, interpreters may sound more natural to the Hearing audience; increasing the chance of the audience finding it humorous.

### **Function**

Visual and vocal cues, laughing, and timing all play an important part when telling a joke. It is also important to know some of the reasons behind why a joke is being told. Deaf and

Hearing culture use humor in a similar manner. In both cultures, the main purpose of humor is to entertain an audience that can result in a positive reaction, such as smiling or laughter. This objective is often accomplished by poking fun at others, cultures, or personal experiences. Humor generally helps form a bond between the person telling the joke and the audience based on enjoyment and laughter (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). Both cultures use humor as a means of influencing their listeners (Holcomb, 2013b). Frequently jokes target behaviors or activities that do not follow the norms of the culture, thus making them undesirable (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012).

### **Benefits**

Another aspect of humor is the joke will benefit those who hear it once they have heard it. A common reaction people have when they see or hear something funny is to smile or laugh. Smiling and laughing has been shown to lead to a decrease in stress and heal the body. When a person laughs the upper half of the body (from the head to the stomach) is engaged. Laughter also increases more oxygen in the blood. More oxygen can result in healthier cells, which could lead to a healthier person. Sharing a smile and a laugh has also been found to form and strengthen friendships (Pease & Pease, 2004).

### **Implications for Interpreters**

When interpreters are on assignments, they are not only interpreting from one language into another, they are also striving to interpret the meaning of the message so that a client can get the same information and meaning out of the message as if they had understood it in the other language. This is called *dynamic equivalence*. In order for dynamic equivalence to be achieved, interpreters must present the meaning of the original message in a manner that is understood by the consumer both linguistically and culturally (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007).

In the following section the author asserts that a category in Deaf Culture humor has an equivalent category in Hearing Culture humor. This idea is simply the author's speculation and suggestion for interpreters. The author formed these speculations by looking for similarities between the two cultures' categories. There needs to be more research done to prove whether or not the author's hypothesis is correct. For now, interpreters must rely on their discretion when they are interpreting a joke.

When an interpreter has to interpret in English for a client that is signing a joke, the interpreter can gauge to which of the four Deaf Culture humor categories the story belongs. It could be Deaf experience humor, where the story is about common experiences Deaf people share. If the story has a punchline, it would fall under the Deaf Culture humor category. Should the story be filled with sign play, it would be ASL humor. If the client is impersonating, becoming the character, or using exaggerated facial expressions, then the story would be visual humor (Holcomb, 2013b). When the interpreter identifies which of the categories the client is using, the interpreter can pick out a Hearing Culture humor equivalent. For example, a joke with tension that is built up and released could be interpreted as if it were a relief humor. If there is a surprise or unexpected element, it be reproduced as a joke from the incongruity category. A story about an ignorant Hearing person or a deaf person, may be interpreted as a superiority category joke (Meyer, 2000).

With the knowledge of which kind of Deaf Culture humor is being used and what its equivalent would be in Hearing Culture humor, an interpreter would be more likely to know how to use his or her voice so that it would be funny for a Hearing person. When the presenter is getting to the punchline of the joke, the interpreter should know to change his or her pitch. The interpreter might also slow down slightly and speak louder (Hoicka & Gattis, 2012). However, the interpreter needs to keep the pace of the joke constant from beginning to end and add a few pauses between ideas to make the joke natural sounding. When it is time to deliver the punchline, the interpreter should pause for a second, then interpret the punchline (Attardo & Pickering, 2011; Provine & Emmorey 2006). By the end of the joke, the interpreter should be smiling to show that something was funny (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012).

If the interpreter's client should be a Hearing person who is telling a joke to a Deaf person, similar steps should be followed to ensure dynamic equivalence will be reached. First, the interpreter uses cues from the Hearing person to determine if a joke is being told by listening for acoustic differences in the client's speech pattern (Hoicka & Gattis, 2012). If the interpreter can see the presenters face, cues such as a smile or the presenter pausing to gauge the audience's reaction are present. The interpreter can listen for cues as to whether the joke fits under the relief, incongruity, or superiority category. After deciding which one or two categories this joke seems to fall under, the interpreter can figure out what the equivalent of it would be in Deaf

Culture. It could be Deaf-experience humor, Deaf Culture humor, ASL humor, or Visual humor (Holcomb, 2013b). Any joke about poking fun at another person, as with superiority humor, can be signed using characterizations or exaggerated facial expressions, making it a part of the Visual humor category. A relief humor joke that comes from the idea that everyone has been through similar circumstances, could be interpreted with characteristics of a Deaf-experience joke. Should the joke have an unexpected punchline, it could be interpreted with characteristics of Deaf Culture humor.

If there is not to be a Deaf humor equivalent, the interpreter always has the option of just making the joke more visually appealing. One way could be using many classifiers to make the joke more descriptive and visual. Another option is to become the characters by using one's whole body to show the characters' actions and interactions. Role shifting is an effective tool to have when the joke seems to include a dialogue between characters. By role shifting, the dialogue will be easier to follow. Finally, another ASL feature would be facial expressions. Simply exaggerating one's facial expressions makes the joke more visually appealing and humorous for Deaf clients (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012).

### **Summary**

Humor is an essential part of both Deaf and Hearing cultures. Something considered to be funny in one culture may not be funny in another because of cultural differences. Interpreters are expected to know and understand these differences and take them into account when interpreting. If the interpreter is unable to comprehend the cultural context of the humor, it will be harder for them to reproduce it in another language (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). Learning the categories, production, and aspects of Deaf and Hearing cultures' humor moves interpreters closer to achieving dynamic equivalence for all.

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