

## A Deaf translation norm?

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### Introduction

Since the 1950s we have started to see greater access to broadcast television for sign language users (Ladd 2007) globally. The first programme in the UK to have British Sign Language as the language of the programme was in the 1950s called For Deaf Children succeeded by Vision On through the mid-70s. The first news programme was News Review, which began in the 1960s and comprised 30 minutes of weekly news and current affairs. These programs (often) have deaf anchors or presenters, presenting to their deaf communities in their national sign languages. News Review also regularly included a news story of relevance to Deaf viewers – something that we still see, for example, in Finland, where there is a news broadcast after the main news presented by a deaf news reader, delivered in Finnish Sign Language, with one or two news stories from the Finnish Deaf community as well as a news headlines summary.

We also see news programs of interpreted news, where the *in-vision* interpreter either works from the spoken language, the autocue, and/or a pivot interpreter (Stone and Russell 2014) into a sign language. Starting with a small inset interpreter in the corner of the screen this has developed to the sharing of the screen with presenters (Allsop and Kyle 2008; Stone 2009; 2019), being present for emergency disaster announcements (McKee 2014), being live-streamed contemporaneously rather than being broadcast *in-vision*, and Deaf media solutions and community journalism that work in parallel with other implementations of mainstream access, e.g. [dailymoth.com](http://dailymoth.com).

Unlike in other areas of sign language interpreting and translation we see far greater engagement with deaf people from deaf communities delivering the *in-vision* interpretation

during broadcast television, etc. (Stone 2009), hence the deployment of the pivot interpreter. They follow a 'Deaf translation norm' that appears to be a community role made public during the 20<sup>th</sup> in some instances, and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in others.

This chapter will explore the role of a Deaf community model of interpreters and translation, i.e. a Deaf translation norm (Adam, Carty, and Stone 2011; Stone 2009). We will examine its history in bi- and multi-lingual Deaf communities and its influencing role on media translation. We will also explore the role of community membership in ensuring a target language text is constructed drawing upon the multimodal nature of the rendering of media broadcasts and pre-recorded programmes that satisfies the needs of sign language using deaf people. In this way we start to explore how the acquisition of these norms occur. We will look at examples from Europe, Australia, and North America.

### **A history of Deaf community translation acts**

Initially it is important for us to look at the notion of a Deaf translation norm and examples found in history. Deaf people have been in existence for time immemorial and form part of the diversity of humanity (Ferri 1906). We catch sight of these individuals obliquely when mentioned by authors throughout history, but it is rare that their stories are specifically told; if they are, then those deaf people are perceived as curiosities rather than as serious subjects of study.

One of these accounts tells us of a married couple, both deaf, who lived in Weymouth, Massachusetts, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Carty, Macready, and Sayers 2009). Here we see, at a time pre-dating institutionalized congregated education for deaf children, a family using sign language (presumably a variant diachronically related to modern day British Sign Language) and engaging in signing discourse with those in the area. When wanting to become a member of the Puritan Church, the wife is examined by the Church Elders and her sisters (both hearing)

act as lay interpreters, while her (deaf) husband acts as her scribe/lay translator. This appears to be the first recorded instant of a deaf person working as a lay translator.

This constellation of lay interpreters and a lay translator raises questions such as: were the sisters unable to render the message faithfully? why was a sight translation from sign language to written English needed and/or desirable? etc. It also points to the role of deaf people within deaf social networks (including families) and communities as language brokers and lay translators and/or interpreters. This role has neither diminished as networks and communities have grown in size, nor as institutional interpreting services have been delivered. Although we are also starting to see the institutionalization of deaf translation in some countries, as will be described below, which often starts from deaf people coming together in institutional contexts.

Deaf people have congregated together in larger urban centres, either through enforced congregation as with the Ottoman empire 1500-1700 (Miles 2000), or through other institutional acts such as congregated education in the form of Deaf Schools (or Asylums) from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Van Cleve 2007). Here we have seen urban sign languages emerge (Jepson 1991), often becoming the named national sign languages when this is deemed to be politically desirable (see Stone and Mirus 2018, for further discussion on national sign languages as constellations of local or regional sign languages).

Within these congregated educational settings, we find accounts of deaf students supporting each other with language brokering and lay translation acts. These could be, for example, because a deaf student does not understand the speech (or sign language use) by a teacher (Adam et al. 2014); or in support of fellow pupils writing home to their families (Adam, Carty, and Stone 2011), etc. These acts (anecdotally) appear to be commonplace, with an expectation that when classmates translate or interpret into sign language this will be produced in a way that follows deaf sign language using cultural norms appropriate to the sign language community. Or follow the written language norms of the mainstream community so that the

written language is unmarked, obscuring lower levels of literacy that some deaf pupils might have. This desire for renditions that are unmarked appear to be a desire for covert translation (House 2010), where the rendition functions as an equivalent within the target culture.

There are also instances of rural communities with higher incidents of deafness in the population where we see the emergence of a local ‘shared’ sign language (Groce 1985; Kusters 2014). In all of these settings we see that people other than deaf people learn their sign languages, children born into those families learn sign languages, and during interactions with those who do not know their sign language(s) there can be a need for sight translation (in literate communities) and interpreting. We still see that community members have preferences over who will interpret for them, so being deaf or being raised in the community is not reason enough to be asked to undertake lay translations. There is some expectation that some norm will be followed.

The expectations of the social networks/communities establish an initial norm (Toury 2012) such that the translation product will be something that adheres to Deaf Community norms, i.e. the target language and culture, rather than adherence to the norms of the source language. In this regard, when possible, the translation then functions as a covert translation (House 2015) in that the translation ‘is not marked pragmatically as a translation text of a source text but may conceivably have been created in its own right’ (2015: 66). And clearly preferences on lay translator would be governed by those able to achieve this initial norm.

In urban areas it has been common for there to be social centres, which might also be sites for spiritual and welfare services, where deaf people congregate. These centres are often called Deaf Clubs (in English speaking countries) and are often important physical places for deaf people to gather, use their language, and to reidentify and redefine what it means to be deaf amongst one’s peers. Deaf communities within urban centres are often bi/multi-lingual, institutionalized education serves some members well and others less so. Even though deaf

people who are sign language users are not educated as monolinguals, they have varying levels of literacy. This, as with many communities, creates the space for language brokering to occur by community members for community members (Adam, Carty, and Stone 2011). The choosing of those who broker, the types of brokering they engage in, and the expectations of how they will fulfil this role is (at least historically) in many ways determined by the community itself (Toury 2012). This is also something that some community members desire, as translation and interpreting becomes institutionalized and deaf communities' voices are either excluded, or less well received by the powers that be.

Within Deaf Communities and deaf social networks (Friedner 2011), as with many minority and minoritized language communities (Piller 2016), there has often been a great desire for access to information and informational support which remains the case today, as can be seen when communities also become virtual communities (Shoham and Heber 2012). With varying levels of education and educational success, there are community members who are known to understand and read the written language(s) of the wider community. They often have roles within community organizations (Deaf Clubs, sports clubs, etc.) and are in positions of trust. Some of these trusted individuals appear to be chosen by the community as language brokers. Their role may have included either (historically) reading the newspaper and then providing a sign language version for less literate community members at the deaf club (Stone 2009); or watching the broadcast news via subtitles/captioning, understanding current affairs, and then sharing that information with their community members. They might also include multi-professionals (Pym 2014), i.e. professional deaf people, or those raised in deaf families, working in the community with the additional responsibility to interpret, such as clerics/religious workers trained via the Deaf Welfare Examination Board in the UK from 1928 (Corfmat 1990).

As Deaf communities and social networks are of a size and number that means community members are known to each other, the roles they play in the community are known, and with that knowledge of engagement and interaction comes trust. This ‘trust’ appears to be one of the factors in the deaf translation norm that supersedes training and can be seen in other community facing interpreting work, not just signed language interpreting for deaf people (Edwards, Temple, and Alexander 2005). Part of this appears to be that known information sharers in the community are also then trusted to provide access to the wider world and are able to follow a covert translation norm.

Even so, that does not mean that all bilinguals would be asked to perform these translation acts. Often one of the factors involved is identity, asking those in your community or social network who are bilingual and can sign, i.e. a deaf person asking another deaf person. And this may be motivated by power asymmetries but also due to a sense of reciprocity, or giving back to the community which includes languaging skills (Forestal 2015).

### **The role of sign language interpreting and translation in the media**

Deaf associations and organizations were often ‘early adopters’ of film and video as this is a natural medium to record sign language (Schuchman 2004). This technological advance, that enabled the preservation of sign languages in a time when their survival was questionable (and some would say still is), opened up the possibility of further sharing signed news with communities. Similarly, and more recently, the internet as a technology has opened up the possibility of sign language virtual networks and communities, as well as covert translations of mainstream media to sign language users, including most recently public health announcements on Covid-19. These shared films, and later videos, broadcasts, or webcasts provide a space for interpreters and translators to engage in a continuation of the deaf

translation norm. First let us look at the establishment of normative practices of information sharing on screen.

Around the world we have seen the emergence of Deaf media and Deaf magazine programs (see Table 30. for a selection). Seeing Deaf people take the lead in presenting information to the community has in many ways created a model for information to be given in a public media, and a desire for Deaf presenters (Allsop and Kyle 2008; De Meulder and Heyerick 2013). Many of these programs were lobbied for by deaf and hearing allies. In some cases, this means that some deaf programs started with hearing presenters who know sign language. Often through lobbying (see Ladd 2007, for an explanation of this process in the UK), deaf presenters are then brought in to present programs. Often the people brought in to present are bilingual deaf people, many of whom in the first generation are known to be trusted and who have undertaken language brokering in the community. As with all norms, that does not mean this is the rule but a trend (at least in the UK, Stone 2009).

Program name	Country	Broadcast from	Deaf presenters
Sehen statt Hören	Germany	1975	from 1990
Prisluhnimo tišini	Slovenia	1980	Yes
Táknmálsfréttir	Iceland	1980	Yes
Televizní klub neslyšících	Czech Republic	1980	from 1991
See hear	UK	1981	Yes
News Review*	New Zealand	1987	Yes
Sign of the Times*	Ireland	1988	Yes
Uutiset viittomakielellä	Finland	1994	Yes

Viikko viitottuna	Finland	1994	Yes
Hands On*	Ireland	1995	Yes
Zprávy v českém znakovém jazyce	Czech Republic	2000	Yes
En lengua de signos	Spain	2008	Yes
Správy v slovenskom posunkovom jazyku	Slovakia	2013	Yes
Viipekeelsed uudised	Estonia	Nd	Yes

Table 30.1: Deaf magazines programs presented in sign languages including news broadcasts (Stepski, nd) \*denotes no longer broadcast

Part of the process of these programs involves working with written scripts and autocue. This type of news and media translation has been analysed (see Vuorinen 1997 amongst others who consider audience design). The decisions about what is translated and what is not rests with the program team, including the scriptwriters and presenters. The goal of these programs is to create a covert translation of the scripts; the programs are magazine programs for the deaf and should be part of community journalism – by the community for the community. And this was echoed in Flanders Belgium when the Deaf community wanted news presented by a Deaf newsreader rather than for the news to be interpreted (De Meulder and Heyerick 2013).

For many members of regional and national Deaf communities the broadcasting of Deaf media presented in regional/national sign languages by Deaf people creates a norm that can be emulated when engaging in translation or interpreting tasks within broadcast, streamed and webcast media. This further embeds a deaf translation norm within this work.

I have previously explored the work of deaf people rendering broadcast regional news into British Sign Language in the UK (Stone 2005; 2009). Part of this study involved semi-



structured interviews with deaf professionals and explored the model they engage in when undertaking their rendering work. The goal of the interviews was to find out motivations for the translation and to explore if there were any norms in deaf people's practices within this setting. Let us consider those now.

### **Norms within mainstream news interpreting in the UK**

Firstly, unlike in the historical tradition, and to some extent Deaf magazine programs, we see that within the broadcast news, deaf individuals do not have agency to choose what is being rendered to the audience. One informant explained: 'some of the reports are really coming from hearing culture, but we have to deliver the information, we can't edit it or change it, but just deliver it' (Rebecca) (Stone 2005: 129).

In the historic tradition, the initial norm is one of deaf language brokers choosing what they see as relevant to the community or translating what they are asked to by the community. We can see this tradition becoming public in British Sign Language access to information projects in the UK supported by the Greater London Council (as was). The London Deaf Video Project (LSVP) funded from 1983, which became the London Deaf Access Project in 1991, was a Deaf-led project with all deaf staff and presenters choosing relevant information from the public sector to be re-presented in British Sign Language for the London Deaf Community (personal communication, Lesley McGilp, March 2020).

For news broadcasts decisions are made by the editors rather than the deaf translators. This does not mean that the British Sign Language translators have no agency, but it does to some extent constrain the choices available to the professionals. The editors may or may not be mindful of the translation process the deaf professionals undertake, but often initial conversations are had with members of the broadcasting team, including fellow newsreaders and floor managers, to foster understanding. This can then lead to a greater sensibility by the

production team as a whole, whereby some newsreaders collaborate with deaf professionals adjusting scripts and/or readings sections slower so that some linguistic challenges can be alleviated.

One example of such a collaboration would be with proper nouns. The production of names using a manual representation of letters – known as fingerspelling – in sign languages typically takes more time than saying a name in a spoken language. If translators are in the same studio as the newsreaders, and there has been the opportunity to develop good team collaborations then newsreaders have been known to say names and pause or to read sections with names in more slowly to support the work of the translator (Stone 2005, 2009). This use of agency on the part of the deaf translator, drawing the newsreader's attention to this need, and ensuring that space is given for information to be rendered in an appropriate way, demonstrates their understanding of their community's need.

This notion of being a bilingual deliverer of information to the deaf community is evident, stemming from the historic tradition. Another informant states that:

If the text is clear then I can produce the information clearly, if the information is complex I don't repeat it complexly, as the audience would not understand it, I need to make changes, what it means exactly, then I ignore the script, change the delivery, so that I say exactly what the story means, then add the details and build it up, so that it matches the meaning of the script. (Clark) (p. 128)

The operational norm is also driven by the overall desire for a covert translation. The script per se is not seen as something that must be adhered to, more that it guides the translation that we see. Due to lack of access to information in signed languages, and varying levels of literacy, some of the assumptions of cultural knowledge in the original script are not appropriate for some members of the deaf audience. Typically, those members of the community who will not

understand the assumed cultural references, are also the members who will benefit least for the subtitled English. There is, therefore, a need:

to create a clear mental picture for them [the Deaf audience], which means that I have to try to digest the information, and then think how I can sign output which gives them a clear mental picture, by creating a clear picture for myself, then think that's it, I want the Deaf audience to have the same mental picture as me, not sign it so that the Deaf people have to build their own picture, bit by bit (Georgina) (p.129)

This effort is to ensure that the product is highly comprehensible for the target audience. And, in further analysis, shows that the Deaf translation norm includes prosodic features (blinks and head movements) to segment the British Sign Language text into phrases and discourse units (Boyes-Braem 1999) understood to be 'sentence' and 'paragraph' markings. Furthermore, the head movements form embedded structures that interrelate different idea units, forming a high level of cohesion in the text.

In addition to the prosodic structure of the text, editorial decisions are made in the restructuring and presentation of the covert translation. As Rebecca says:

there is background information on the news, the news from 6 to 25 past has lots of information and I read that to find out what they are talking about, then look at my script, much reduced information, if I feel it can be delivered as is I do it, if there is one word that is difficult, I can take information from the larger script, add it, so that it has the same meaning, with that background information, I only started doing this recently and Clark is the same, it's good restructuring and adding background information, so that it is clear ... really for a Deaf audience it's only 30 seconds, what I feel is appropriate information from the larger script, I can't tell the script writers that their summary is poor, so I add information, just one or two pieces so it's clear (p.131)

Although the deaf in-vision translator-presenter cannot choose the script they can modify what information is presented. This agency further promotes the notion of a covert translation where the information that can be expanded upon is still taken from the news script. Accurate information can be found within longer news broadcasts to ensure that the information is clear for the deaf audience. This implies that while the initial norm of television broadcast news constrains the Deaf translation norm, the operational norms of re-editing and representing a deaf audience an appropriate summary create a space for the Deaf translation norm to be reasserted. This is mentioned by several of the informants, including Clark, who notes:

on Newsweek or the headlines we are always talking about changing to match the audience ... we have to find out what the background information is, the script may not be clear, and so we need the background information so that we can put those in and sign it so that it is understood by the audience, we need to put in cultural information (p.132)

And so, the historic tradition in many ways is followed. Potential institutional barriers are navigated so that the constructed Deaf audience receives a product that they are expecting. In many ways this enables us to see the co-constructed 'social role' of the deaf professionals. The community places trust upon them to provide a British Sign Language version of the news, the conceit being that it is not a translation, i.e. it is covert. The deaf professionals feel the weight of this responsibility, as community members, and as trusted language brokers who, now in a professional space, are still expected to provide an appropriate British Sign Language product.

### **Expectations and norms within new media**

In his seminal essay, Toury (2012) introduced the notion that translations should be seen as culturally significant and that translatorship includes playing '*a social role*, i.e., to fulfil a function allotted by a community' (2012: 168). We can see from the discussion above that

there is a historical tradition within deaf social networks and communities for bilinguals to support those with less literacy or understanding of the mainstream. These bilingual individuals are often the ones chosen to present, and then become publicly seen as interpreters and translators in broadcasts, video media and more recently webcasts, etc. This is a norm rather than a rule, i.e. this is something that is typically seen rather than mandated or obliged; it is a pattern that we see emerging from the system.

While within mainstream interpreted broadcasts it is the editors (most often not from deaf communities) who provide the source language, in new media (webcasting, etc.) there is a space for greater levels of agency. Here we see Deaf organizations also taking advantage of new forms of media to provide news and information to the wider community. The *faces* of this information are Deaf community members, often known for their roles as presenters, or with other professional roles in the community that include presenting information. These multi-professionals are then engaging in a long tradition of deaf translation norms that are often overlooked at an institutional or training level by governments, local authorities, commissioners of translation, and sign language interpreter education.

This translation norm can drive the desires of the community when wanting to decide on the public face on interpreting and translation. Moreover, in some contexts with new media and new domains of translation, while we see collaboration between deaf and hearing colleagues, much of the translation activity is driven by deaf translators.

In Brazil we have seen the institutional acceptance of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) not only on a policy level but also in the generation of Libras educational materials at tertiary education levels. In this context we see that: ‘Hearing people functioned more like coworkers with regard to the translation process because the actual translation of the pedagogical materials was carried out solely by Deaf translator-actors’ (Müller de Quadros, Xavier de Souza, and

Ramalho Segala 2012: 38). The goal of the translators is to ‘minimize estrangement’ (2012: 39) and a Deaf translator is used in preference to other translators.

It is not, however, sufficient to be culturally adept and linguistically fluent, nor is it assumed today that this can occur without training (see De Meulder and Heyerick 2013 for an example in Flanders). Müller de Quadros et al suggest that the translators:

also need to know how to present themselves as actors, “TV hosts,” if you will, and to have an artistic spirit, to know how to use body language, gesture, mime, and other performing strategies for the camera since translation into sign language is from a written text into a visual, spatial, and recorded signed text. These translators are essentially performers. (2012: 25)

This performance element of presenting a signed language ensures that there is a ‘material presence of the body of the translator’ (2012: 25). This presence, that brings co-authorship to the fore, is perhaps at the core of the Deaf translation norm. Seeing someone, whose face you recognize, whose fluency is marked by their signed language production, and whose authority to do so is known by community members due to their close ties to the community.

We see similar discussions in the US regarding the press conferences on the Covid-19 outbreak in a variety of states. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the US, that is the principal body that assesses and certifies interpreters, issued a position statement on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020.<sup>1</sup> The position statement states: ‘Deaf interpreters... play a vital role in conveying highly consequential information to large and diverse populations of Deaf people... it is crucial to consistently incorporate a Deaf interpreter when providing interpreting services for press conferences’. And so, we see that with ever expanding media and higher levels of access to society at large, the once private role of the deaf interpreter is now made public and fully endorsed by, and in some cases expected by, professional sign language interpreter associations.

## **Conclusion**

When we consider the history of deaf communities and social networks, and the roles that members of these communities and networks have played in providing translation for others within the communities and networks (be that as a lay translator or, more recently, professionally) we can see that this has established a community norm. This long view of the translation norms in many ways fulfils the call from Morini (2015) to consider translation norms diachronically. This deaf translation norm is still in operation and appears to be the intersection between attitudinal and behaviour norms (Malmkjær 2005) and clearly is desired by the community.

The deaf translation norm appears to be informed by the desire for the target language that is used being unaccented, or ‘native’ like. In some ways this mirrors what we see from the Paris School of conference interpreting in that in this model interpreters ideally work into their native language and it is normalized in high level meetings and international institutions such as the EU or the UN. However, it would appear that part of the desire for a deaf translation norm is also bound to the authorship of the translator-actors through the material presence of their body in the translation.

As more deaf people are gaining access to translator and interpreter education, the numbers of deaf people able to engage in professional translation and interpretation increases. I previously (Stone 2009) contended that the Deaf translation norm is not something that is exclusively performed by deaf interpreters and translators. My position is that, if taught and developed during interpreter education, it might be possible for those highly fluent in a signed language(s), and hearing, whether raised in a Deaf community or social network, or socialized into one, to engage in this norm.

It would be interesting to see ten years on whether this position still holds true. It would also be of interest to explore how different dimensions of this norm, such as the political, empowerment, language ownership, etc. (De Meulder and Heyerick 2013) change over time.

### **Further reading**

- Adam, R., Carty, B., and Stone, C. (2011) Ghostwriting: Deaf Translators within the Deaf Community, *Babel*, 57(4), pp. 375–393.

This article analyses the lay translation work of deaf people in the UK and Australia working between signed languages (British Sign Language, Australian Sign Language [Auslan], and Australian Irish Sign Language) and written English, between signed languages, and as liaison interpreters.

- Adam, R., Stone, C., Collins, S., and Metzger, M. (eds.) (2014) *Deaf Interpreters at Work: International Insights*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

This volume is a collection of chapters written by working deaf interpreters and translators, that touches on personal histories, working in deaf-non-deaf teams, working in deaf-deaf teams for deafblind people and developments in deaf interpreter assessment and accreditation.

- Ladd, P. (2007) ‘Signs of Change – Sign Language and Televisual Media in the UK’, in Cormack, M. and Hourigan, N. (eds) *Minority Language Media*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 229–247.

A description of the evolution of sign language programming on television in the UK.

- Stone, C. (2009) *Towards a Deaf Translation Norm*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

An analysis of deaf people undertaking the regional broadcast news in the UK that explores the process and product of these professionals and their reflections on their work.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://rid.org/rid-position-statement-cdis-at-press-conferences/>