

Sign language conference interpreting

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Sign Language Conference Interpreting

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Abstract

Interpreting between signed and spoken languages has become steadily more visible to the general public around the world in recent decades. The chapter summarises the nature and development of signed language conference interpreting, defining key terms and concepts with attention to distinctive aspects of service provision. These are rooted in the visual-gestural forms that encode signed meaning, and the physical and social features of communication and cultural expression associated with the lived experiences of participants in Deaf communities. The work undertaken by these interpreters in conference settings is described with reference to a number of diversifications, including the demand for ‘International Sign’ provision intended to be accessible to the multinational audiences arising as a result of increasing global mobility. We review the particular experiences and practices of interpreters who may be either deaf or hearing and address the combination of their skills in the delivery of appropriate services. Future challenges highlighted include the need for enhancement of professionalization through codification of norms and standards, and important questions about relationships among professionals and between human and non-human agents in the field.

Keywords

Conference interpreting, Deaf interpreters, hearing interpreters, history, International Sign, interpreter education, professionalization, sign language, signed language interpreting, team interpreting

Introduction

Interpreters are, almost by definition, very rarely prominent figures in society. Their job is to facilitate interaction without drawing attention to their work. In many situations they are literally out of sight – in booths or otherwise ‘off-stage’ – and therefore out of mind. For obvious reasons, however, the sign language interpreter (SLI) is often an exception to this pattern. Whenever they are signing, these interpreters must be seen in order to fulfil their communicative task. The world has therefore become increasingly used to seeing SLIs, particularly occupying a corner of a television screen, but also in settings such as theatres, political conventions and other civic events. It is ironic, but true, that the most prominent SLI on Earth – at the globally-televised memorial ceremony for Nelson Mandela in South Africa – turned out to be an incompetent ‘fake’ interpreter (Turner 2013) whose disreputable actions highlighted the need for professionalism and public diligence in the field.

Although SLIs’ practices have been defined and refined over the last half-century, there remains relatively little research into their operation in conference settings (Turner 2007). This paper provides an overview of that particular landscape, with a mainly European and North American focus. We start with an introduction to concepts, frames, history and definitions. We briefly mention conference types, languages and forms of signing, noting the contributions of deaf and hearing interpreters. Subsequent sections deal with interpreting between signed and spoken languages at conferences; with interpreting between signed languages (SLs); and with team interpreting. We discuss where conference interpreters work (countries, institutions, topics, formats); who the interpreters are and how are they selected; how assignments progress and what the experience of service delivery is like in different contexts; and what is known about service users’ perspectives. In concluding, we will identify major challenges facing the field, addressing interpreter education and the future agenda, especially with regard to research.

Frames and definitions

The acknowledgment of SLs within linguistics (Stokoe 1960) and the strengthening representation of signing communities (De Meulder et al. 2019) since the mid-20th century created conditions in which interpreting using signed language could be developed and institutionalized in countries around the world. Whilst outcomes remain highly variable, progress can be seen in the articulation of occupational principles, establishment of practitioner associations and codification of working conditions (McKee 2006; Wit 2016; WASLI 2019). An organic body of scholarship attempts to situate the field in relation to working languages, communities and social institutions and explores alignment with the education and training debates, professional practice descriptions and theoretical frames of interpreting and translation studies (Roy 2000; Harrington & Turner 2000; Grbić 2007; Roy et al. 2018, etc.). The visual-gestural nature of signing inherently means that the canonical work of SLIs has historically taken place in face-to-face contexts, with consequences including immediate sensitivity to power imbalances between majority and disadvantaged minority language users (Baker-Shenk 1991).

The neat definitional lines between translation and interpreting may at times be blurred (see, for example, Turner & Pollitt 2002 for discussion of ‘hybrid’ mediational practices between signed and spoken/written languages), but the absence of everyday orthographic systems to represent signing on the page (Grushkin 2017) has meant that the field’s scholarly tradition concentrates on transient, live-action interpreting rather than recorded translation.

Simultaneous rather than consecutive interpreting practices are routinely adopted (though cf. Russell 2002). Much of this is public service, community or otherwise prototypically dialogue interpreting work (Grbić & Pöllabauer 2006) occurring in environments such as legal (e.g. Brennan & Brown 2004; Mathers 2018) and educational settings (e.g. Winston 2004).

However, this landscape is variable – in much of the Global South, the *only* professional SLI services may be for prestigious, conference-type work; whereas in the Global North, the advance of deaf signing employees into white-collar work has led beyond longstanding community environments toward more widespread availability of SLIs working with deaf employees and their colleagues in the required conferences, workshops and meetings (e.g. Dickinson 2014). Given the above, it is clear that interpreting with SLs does happen at conferences (Turner 2007), but this is not prototypical and has *per se* been little researched. Correspondingly, whilst SLI education has evolved country by country – albeit in a rather piecemeal, variable and often rather insecure way (Winston & Monikowski 2013) –

descriptions and guidelines for good practice can be found. However, in this climate, developing and maintaining generic interpreter education practices has been hard enough: there are rarely robust opportunities to learn about best practices for the delivery of conference services.

History

Seeing signed language interpreters in conference-like settings (SLCIs) is often regarded as a present-day phenomenon, but instances can be traced back to the 19th century. Following the founding of the first schools for the deaf in the second half of the 18th century and the migration of deaf individuals to major cities, a deaf middle class started to grow. Deaf people began to organize themselves in clubs and associations, which served not only for socializing, but also as sites of mutual support and social-political activism (Söderfeldt 2013). From 1834 on, the elite deaf community in Paris started to organize annual *deaf-mute banquets*, consisting of a meal and a tradition of toasts and speeches, so that invited hearing people had to use interpreters (Mottez 1993: 33).

Although there is likely to have been various kinds of interpreting undertaken during these national and international gatherings, there is little systematic research available. In historical records, interpreters are mentioned now and then. Christopher Morgan (1850), for instance, reports that Thomas Gallaudet was appointed interpreter “for the benefit of the deaf and dumb gentlemen present” at the first *Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf and Dumb* in 1850. A newspaper article on the international deaf conference in Vienna in 1874 tells about Dr. Lauterstein, who interpreted for the media representatives (N. N. 1874). Amos Draper (1890: 31) reports about a “curiosity” at a meeting of American and British deaf people in London, where they had to rely on two interpreters, “the Americans would sign to Dr. Gallaudet, who would speak to Mr. Stainer, who would spell to the audience”. A rather modern interpreting assignment is reported by an Austrian attendant of the World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf in Rome in 1957. While conference interpreters worked in booths for the hearing audience, for “the deaf delegates from all countries [...] several hearing interpreters, mostly adult sons of deaf parents, were available” (P. 1957, authors’ translation). Furthermore, reports confirm that deaf persons, who evidently had the necessary hearing and speaking skills, acted as conference interpreters themselves. At the 1893 National Congress of the Deaf in Chicago, e.g., some deaf men interpreted others’ papers into spoken English, while presenting their own papers in American Sign Language (ASL), showing “themselves

as masters of all modes of language” (Murray 2007: 83; cf. Leahy 2019).

In the course of the professionalization process of SL interpreting, which started in the USA in the 1960s (Quigley 1965), so called ‘platform interpreting’, i.e. interpreting delivered by a practitioner standing on a conference platform, had an established place from the very beginning. In a manual published after a workshop of the *Registry of interpreters for the Deaf*, Falberg (1965) proposes guidelines for platform interpreting, including positioning and appearance, preparation, target groups, size of signs, etc. Looking back, it is very noticeable that the term alludes to a presumption that this work only involves interpreting from spoken into signed form: in other words, source presentations are expected to be delivered in the USA’s majority language, English.

Current landscape

For SLIs in the 21st century, a range of situations may represent conference-like working environments (cf. definitions in Pöchhacker 2013). These vary in terms of scale, type, participants and audiences, ranging from auditorium-based conferences (e.g. large-scale events hosted by academic and international organizations) through other multi-party ‘platform’ work (e.g. university lectures; presentations to church congregations; community forum consultations) to smaller, more intensive meetings (e.g. school councils and governance; board rooms negotiations; public policy deliberations). The conference-type environment requires two very different kinds of modality-dependent practices for SLIs: they will prototypically be stationed on the platform near to primary presenters when working into SL, but occupying front-row seats alongside other viewers to work from signed into spoken language. Since there is a need for clear and proximate sightlines in order to observe primary participants’ signed output, SLCIs are very rarely stationed in the booths usually occupied by colleagues who interpret between spoken languages. Visual cues can therefore assist communication management between SLIs and signing presenters.

Challenges for SLCIs overlap in many respects with those of other interpreters, including dealing with rapid, scripted delivery (bearing in mind that no SLI can review script and watch a signing presenter simultaneously); handling the added pressure of a directly minuted or recorded working environment; coping with much less interaction with primary participants (for clarification, etc.) than they may be used to in other situations; adjusting to the relative formality and register specificity of the situation. There are also some different aspects

relating to the operative modalities. For example, the use of media resources (e.g. slide displays) alongside spoken presentations has become standard at conferences, but the overlay of competing visual forms of information can present an attention-management challenge for SLCIs. Away from community settings, it is likely – given the historic disadvantaging of deaf people in educational and employment processes – that a high proportion of business will be presented in speech, requiring SLCIs to undertake more work into SL with consequently higher risk of physical fatigue and repetitive strain injury (Fischer & Woodcock 2012).

The account that unfolds below also highlights two signal features of this landscape. One of these is the existence of International Sign (IS). This is a set of linguistic practices and forms occupying interlingual spaces between national SLs. Whilst the latter have increasingly been described scientifically and acknowledged socio-politically (De Meulder et al. 2019), signers have always been aware of fluid translanguaging or cross-signing (Zeshan 2015; Kusters et al. 2017) behaviours that enable users of diverse SLs to communicate across boundaries of nation, language and community. These behaviours have, until recently, been the subject of little systematic study due to the need to confirm the full linguistic status of national SLs. As such status becomes increasingly secure, the phenomenon of IS has entered the picture (Rosenstock 2004; Mesch 2010; Hansen 2016), construed broadly in two ways. Firstly, IS is the informal, intuitive use of visual-gestural principles for communication whenever signers from distinct language backgrounds encounter one another (Rosenstock 2004). History and heritage may differ wildly, but *up* points in one direction and *down* the other, no matter where one comes from: and this type of affordance supplies foundations upon which complex interaction can be co-constructed. Secondly, although conscious efforts to establish a signed Esperanto ('Gestuno') failed to take flight (McKee & Napier 2002), rising levels of participation by signers in stable international forums such as the United Nations and the European Union have led to increasing conventionalization of lexicon and morpho-syntax, moving towards greater codification under the label *International Sign* (Whynot 2016). Whilst both approaches to IS can be seen from time to time in the output of SLIs at international conferences and events, this is a uniquely complex and sometimes problematic aspect of provision (Moody 2002, 2008; Wit 2010, 2020; Rosenstock & Napier 2016).

The second important feature to highlight here is a change that is affecting the constitution of the workforce in this area. Any review of the wider literature (e.g. Grbić 2007) will show that it has tended to centre on the work of hearing SLIs, but deaf people have practised as

interpreters for some time (Turner 2006; Adam & Stone 2011), and – thanks to more facilitative working environments made possible through access to education, enabling policies in the workplace, shifting social attitudes, developing appreciation of aspects of service quality, and the effect of digital technologies on modes of practice – their contribution as SLIs has started to be acknowledged, described and theorized more prominently (Stone 2009; Adam et al. 2014; Brück & Schaumberger 2014). Deaf SLCIs' output will typically be into a signed language. Their source input, however, will typically be taken not from speech, but from either a signed source presentation (e.g. interpreting from ASL to Deutsche Gebärdensprache); another (hearing) interpreter's 'feed' (e.g. representing in British Sign Language (BSL) an English-speaker's lecture which can then be interpreted into IS for a multinational audience); or from a written text appearing on a screen or autocue (Boudreault 2005). Practices are standardising, but effective training is often in short supply (Forestal 2005) and the relevant literature is only beginning to track this area of practice.

Interpreting directly between a spoken and a signed language

In Europe there are over seventy educational programs (Wit 2020) for SLIs, with many more in the United States of America¹ and around the world. Relatively few of these are integrated with established academic programs in interpreting and translation studies. The programs operate at various educational levels and focus primarily on interpreting between the national signed and spoken language (with the consequence that they are rarely accessible to deaf students). According to Wit (2020), students in Europe typically do not have any sign language fluency when entering the program. Such students consequently need to acquire a new language – their national signed language – as well as develop interpreting skills in a relatively short time span. These generic sign language interpreting programs do not specifically center on conference interpreting. In the absence of conference sign language interpreting programs – or even specific classes, in most cases – SLIs commonly learn conference interpreting in practice, just by doing it (Turner & Napier 2014; Wit & Sluis 2016). This stands in contrast to spoken language interpreters who have the opportunity to be trained via specialized conference interpreting programs, predominantly at Masters/postgraduate level (Wit 2020). An additional challenge for SLIs is the use of English as a lingua franca (see chapter X/ELF in this volume), especially in conference-type settings (Wit 2010; De Meulder et al. 2018). The vast majority of SLIs worldwide do not have English as a native language but must nevertheless meet the rising demand for interpretation between English and their national sign language.

Conference spoken language interpreting as a profession developed rapidly after the establishment of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) in 1953 (Baigorri-Jalón 2014, see also chapter X/The history of conference interpreting in this volume). There remain, however, many misconceptions about the professional status of SLCIs, who are rarely considered to be on equal footing to spoken language interpreters. AIIC, admitting SLIs as members since 2012, has pushed for this equal recognition and passed a resolution² stating that all AIIC members are conference interpreters (Monfort & Wit 2012; Wit & Tiselius 2017), whether they work with SLs, spoken languages or both. In addition, AIIC has published specific guidelines³ for working with SLIs in conference settings. The guidelines cover working in mixed teams with spoken and signed language interpreters, plus technical specifications for sound engineers when they have SLIs in the conference hall. There are also guidelines on the positioning of SLIs in conference settings and for web streaming purposes. These guidelines were designed, based on best practices, by experienced interpreters in cooperation with stakeholders.

The guidelines have proven to be helpful for conference organizers and technicians, and also for interpreters. For example, one of the most common assumptions SLIs encounter is that sign language is universal. Thus, when sign language interpretation is requested at a conference the organizers are often unaware that they have to specify which sign language is needed. It is very common for SLIs to work in *retour*, i.e. not only interpreting from the signed to the spoken language, but also from the spoken language into the signed language. The former is commonly referred to as *voicing* or *voicing over* (although Haualand and Nilsson (2019) propose to speak simply of “interpreting from a signed to a spoken language” in order to highlight the equivalence of status). In a multilingual conference setting, the SLIs often work from a relay provided by the spoken language interpreters in the booth as they typically do not have several passive languages from which they can work.

Interpretation at conferences in a national sign language most often happens at nationally organized events and less at an international level. At international events, IS is increasingly requested rather than the national sign language of the country where the event is held (Whynot 2016; WFD 2019). In this way, the conference serves an international deaf audience (and can do this to an even greater extent when the interpretation services are also streamed online). When first encountered, IS is not instantly understandable, but competent signers can

usually understand it after fairly brief exposure (i.e. weeks or months rather than years). What makes interpretation with IS especially challenging is that the interpreter must produce an interpretation for a linguistically and culturally diverse audience present in the conference room as well as anyone watching remotely (Wit et al. 2021).

Generally, SLCIs deal with a complex set of demands and variables (Wit 2010). As noted above, unlike spoken language interpreters in a booth, they cannot look at a written paper presentation and interpret at the same time. It is therefore particularly important that SLIs receive documents promptly in order to prepare prior to interpreting. In addition, the interpreters often experience organizers who are not used to working with their services. As a result, a disproportional amount of the interpreters' time and energy is spent on guiding the organizer through the logistics involved in the sign language interpretation, instead of preparing for the interpreting task at hand (Wit & Sluis 2016, 2017). The following examples show some of these specific logistical needs.

In a conference setting, SLIs stand next to the speaker facing the audience. Hence, the interpreter is not able to see the actual presentation projected behind them. It is therefore recommended that an additional screen, mirroring the content of the main screen, is placed at a lower point in front of the interpreter. In this way, the interpreter can see the same visual input as the audience which will make it easier to understand the context and create the interpretation.

Another requirement that is often overlooked is the channel used for the audio input for the interpreter working from a spoken to a signed language. The interpreters either receive the audio through the loudspeakers in the room, the so-called audio monitors, or through wireless receivers with a headset. The latter is generally preferred by the interpreters because they can then personally control the volume and input channel. However, in the case of wireless receivers, conference organizers tend to prefer infrared over radio-type receivers: the reverse is true for SLIs, who prefer radio-type receivers, leaving no need to have a direct line between the sending and receiving device. With a radio-type receiver, the interpreter can place the receiver anywhere on their clothing, preferably where it does not create visual distraction for the viewing audience. With an infrared receiver this is not possible, causing a distorted signal if there is no direct visual line.

Interpreting an event which is also web streamed brings additional demands. The interpreter will need to look into the camera to simulate eye contact with the virtual audience and at the same time must communicate with those in the conference room. It should also not be underestimated that being live on camera and being recorded can cause additional pressure on the interpreter and may have an effect on their cognitive abilities and physical wellbeing.

Finally, given all of the above, it must be mentioned that it is a challenge for conference organizers to book experienced SLCIs for their event, specifically IS interpreters, as the number of qualified IS interpreters is limited (Wit et al. 2021).

Deaf interpreters

While the majority of SLIs can hear, recent years have gradually seen the inclusion of deaf individuals in the profession (Boudreault 2005; Forestal 2014; Stone 2009; Adam et al. 2014; Tester 2018). Underlying changes in educational experiences, institutional attitudes and the affordances of digital technologies have played a part in this shift. It has also been argued that deaf individuals have intimate lived knowledge of the signing community, affording them particular insight into what it means to be deaf, how to conceptualize deaf experiences and incorporate visual communication skills into their work (Adam et al. 2014). Similarly, their use of SL is shaped by their embodied experience of being deaf (Hauser et al. 2010; Howard 2014). This lived deaf experience includes nonverbal communication with non-signers, diverse communication styles and personal backgrounds of the signing community, and being a language broker (e.g. Forestal 2005). The net result is growing appreciation of the contributions of deaf interpreters, including to work in the broad range of conference environments described in the previous section.

While research on deaf interpreters (DIs) is still relatively new, there is a growing body of literature that addresses aspects of DI practices. This includes: describing DIs' translation and interpreting processes (Peters & Scholl 2018; Tester 2021); DIs' professionalization and ethical decision-making (Stone et al. 2007; Sheneman 2016); DIs' perceptions of their own role (Adam et al. 2011; Cole 2019); curriculum development and training of and by DIs (McDermid, 2010); identification of fundamental characteristics and functions required of DIs (Bienvenu & Colonomos 1992; Boudreault 2005); co-working between deaf and non-deaf interpreters (Nicodemus & Taylor 2014; Stone & Russell 2014); and practices in specific settings (Stone 2009; De Meulder & Heyerick 2013; Tester 2018, 2021) or with specific

populations (e.g. deafblind individuals as explored by Collins in 2014).

The level of professionalization of DIs and the barriers involved are largely dependent on systems within the country in which they are based (Stone et al. 2007). While many countries do not formally recognize or train DIs, the profession is a fast-growing area of focus in Brazil, Japan, Republic of Korea and many countries in the EU. A few countries – such as Austria, Estonia, Germany, United Kingdom, and United States – already fully recognize and accredit DIs (Lindsay 2016). Others – such as Denmark, Iceland and Portugal – partially recognize DIs depending on the task or specific domain: for example, DIs may be qualified to work as translators but not as public service interpreters, or vice versa (Stone et al. 2007; Lindsay 2016). DIs work at national and international conferences, at high-level meetings and increasingly for online web streaming work.

Some DIs work with several language pairs and modalities, including two or more national SLs, IS, written texts and various audio-visual technologies (Boudreault 2005). A DI may receive signed source output from a presenter (in a national SL or in IS) and function as a ‘feed’ or pivot to a colleague standing on the conference platform who interprets into an alternative signed form. With the expansion of media technologies, the source text may be taken from a TV monitor displaying the signing presenter. If spoken output is needed, then the DI functions as a pivot between the signing presenter and a hearing interpreter who speaks to hearing audience members.

At events where the conference language is predominately English and IS is the target (e.g. UN), the DI works closely with a hearing colleague (Stone & Isari 2018) who functions as a pivot and provides them with the source text in a national SL to be re-presented in IS by the DI (Stone & Russell 2014). At the national level, DIs may also reframe the language produced by the hearing pivot without switching languages. Thus, the speaker may speak English; the hearing interpreter renders this into ASL; and the DI reframes the ASL to produce output – often by using a more idiomatic or visually enriched form that has been described as “heritage signing” (Turner 1999) – for a specific audience (Bienvenu & Colonos 1992; Ressler 1999; Boudreault 2005). Alternatively, DIs may read from live captioning of the spoken source text – appearing on a monitor placed on the stage facing the DI – and render a signed interpretation to the audience (Stone & Russell 2014).

Team interpreting

As noted above, the development of ‘platform interpreting’ has long been considered part of SLI practices. One could argue that in earlier times, even though SLIs were expected to provide a simultaneous rendition of a presentation, speech or intervention, this would have been in accordance with community interpreting norms rather than the practices associated with the conference environment. SLIs would, for example, have interacted with presenters by asking for clarification and repetition (as described in early work such as Roy 1989), and this can still be seen today in domains such as education, although practice is changing (Smith 2013).

Towards the latter half of the 20th century, mainstream stakeholders, the interpreting profession and some deaf people with managerial or academic employment began to expect that SLIs would adopt conference interpreting norms. Such norms are sometimes foregrounded even though SLIs are often still positioned to be able to interact with presenters. This moves the work of SLCIs away from a community interpreting model, well recognized by Deaf communities, of interacting and ensuring space for comprehension and effective rendition of content, and towards a conference interpreting model affording interpreters less opportunity for checking or clarification with signing participants. This shift notwithstanding, SLIs still typically work bi-directionally rather than only interpreting into their A language(s).

As noted above, professionalization of SL interpreting has brought about greater appreciation of ergonomic risks (Fischer & Woodcock 2012) and therefore of the need for improved working conditions. For SLIs, this has fuelled understanding of the need for team interpreting in general (Hoza 2010) within community and especially conference settings (Stone & Russell 2013, 2014). There is consequently a much stronger expectation that interpreters will work in intensive, shorter bursts. Emerging practice sometimes offers three interpreters co-operating such that two are active (supporting each other) while the third interpreter rests and may well leave the room.

The organization of interpreting teams is beginning to acknowledge that there should be at least two (preferably three) interpreters per language pair (e.g. English/ASL or ASL/BSL), working and covering those languages bilaterally. One interpreter will be actively interpreting (rendering the message from English to ASL or vice-versa) while the second (non-rendering) interpreter monitors and supports the active interpreter while they are working (Sforza 2014).

Descriptively, it may be appropriate to speak of a macro-team comprised of all the working interpreters; meso-teams of interpreters who share the same language combinations; and micro-teams comprised of interpreters with different language combinations working for a specific speaker or session.

The support from the non-rendering interpreter can be of an environmental nature (ie. directing a colleague's attention to information in the room such as who is speaking, pointing to slides that contain relevant information, etc.); a linguistic nature (reproducing lexicon that may have been missed be that in a spoken, written or signed format, providing spellings – a way of calquing spoken words letter by letter using specific hand configurations, etc.); or of general affirmation (e.g. nodding to confirm the accuracy/appropriateness of a co-interpreter's decision).

With interpreters working between two signed languages (typically DIs), or rendering messages one-to-one with deafblind people (Sforza 2014) – where the client and interpreter need to be in direct, dyadic physical contact since linguistic information is primarily conveyed through touch – this configuration can also be seen. Each interpreter in a team may work for 15-20 minutes as an active/rendering interpreter and then 15-20 minutes as a support/non-rendering interpreter (Bentley-Sassaman & Dawson 2013). This could continue throughout the session, or each interpreter could interpret for one presenter (normally up to 40 minutes) while being supported.

Team configurations vary slightly when there are deaf-hearing interpreting teams working within larger mixed (multilingual and multimodal) interpreting teams. Here there is a divide between the support offered to the active co-interpreter (hearing or deaf) rendering to an interpreter colleague via a pivot language, and the support offered to the active interpreter rendering to the audience (deaf or hearing) (Stone and Russell 2013). Interpreters rendering to the audience are supported by others in the team who are non-rendering at that time but remain jointly responsible for interpreting to the audience.

Deaf communities have, over time, secured better access to tertiary education, higher-status employment and international political engagement. This has ensured greater levels of mobility and participation in higher-level meetings and international academic conferences. Funding has permitted a larger presence of different sign languages with interpreting

provision which can now commonly reach 10-15 sign language interpreting teams at events. In 2016, the hemicycle of the European Parliament saw 31 teams of SLIs providing access in all the national sign languages of the EU. At such congresses, the logistics of multilingual provision creates a complexity (Supalla et al. 2010) that can be compounded by the experience the countries have of multilingual provision. The EU institutions are familiar with several national sign languages being interpreted at once, ensuring there is access to materials for all interpreting teams, coordination of meetings with presenters so that all SLI teams can be present for preparation purposes, and providing sufficient space and facilities within auditoria to house different teams of interpreters (including, if required, spoken language interpreter booths to provide pivot languages). From the literature, it appears that some areas have less experience of providing multilingual provision: while some Canadian regions, for example, regularly provide interpretation into English, French, ASL and Langue des Signes Québécois, the United States of America typically only considers the addition of ASL interpreting teams working from English rather than multilingual provision (though see, e.g., Ramsey & Peña 2010).

Within settings that have multilingual teams which might have multiple languages in both spoken and signed modalities, steps need to be taken to ensure that macro-team and micro-team meetings are inclusive, which can require interpreters to work during those team meetings. Sensitivities can also arise if hearing interpreters choose to speak in front of deaf colleagues: it can often be preferred that hearing interpreters choose to use SLs that may be less easily understood by the deaf participants but are nevertheless expressed in an accessible modality. One of the phenomena now apparent in some settings is that IS – of a more or less formal variety, as appropriate – will be used within macro- and micro-teams to ensure that modality-appropriate interaction occurs.

Future Challenges

It has taken some decades, then, for the significance of SLIs' conference work to be appreciated, but as this has begun to happen, they have been better accommodated and respected in the workplace, professionally recognized (e.g. by AIIC) and more suitably remunerated. This is work in progress. Norms and standards of practice must and will continue to evolve (Wit 2020), not least as deaf interpreters come to the fore. Education will continue to be enhanced – for individual SLIs; for deaf-hearing pairings; for team members who all work with SLs; and for groups of colleagues working closely together with

combinations of multiple signed and spoken languages. All of these elements will benefit from greater engagement with stakeholders (communities and audiences, commissioning agents and employers, institutional host organizations, trainers, policy-makers, professional associations).

The research agenda for this developing area of study is inevitably extensive, and changing almost daily in light of the global challenge that has gathered pace during 2020. Whilst the world was becoming familiar prior to 2020 with seeing SLCIs in operation under the auspices of an increasing range and number of institutions, this has increased sharply as dissemination and consultation activities have been forced to occur with new urgency. Pressure to communicate efficiently with signing communities has driven innovation, especially in terms of interpreting to camera for broadcast and online interaction. Practitioners have therefore been obliged to adapt working norms to diverse new contexts of institutional and ergonomic operation, and norms for remote SLCI services have emerged and been codified at speed.

Whether in-person or remotely, however, SLCIs are conscious of disparities in access to services. These include disadvantages of all conceivable kinds, all rooted in differences in resources and forms of capital. As remote interpreting expands, for example, suitable hardware and high-speed broadband become vital to everyday life – yet remain unavailable to many. National variations in service provision and quality could scarcely be more stark. In the better world many hope to see emerge from the shock of a global pandemic, these are issues that cannot be ignored.

One line of argument contends that automation of interpreting (signed and spoken) is bound to constitute a significant part of the solution (see chapter x/technologies in this volume). The very idea is hotly contested across the interpreting field (Downie 2019), and where both the comprehension and the production of signing are concerned, automation faces major hurdles. These are summarized by Bragg et al. (2019) and include i. shortcomings in the size and richness of signed datasets; ii. challenges in annotating and analysing the visual components of signed utterances; iii. modelling and processing problems arising from the pervasive simultaneous layering (manual, facial and bodily) within the signed signal and the grammatical use of spatial relations; iv. the complexity and cost of generating sufficiently natural graphic representations of continuous signing; and v. the many demands of interface and user experience design. In this context, the rationale for continuing to augment the status

of SLs needs to have extremely robust, resilient arguments of principle and a firm empirical evidence-base in which to cement itself. In a climate where funding for new research is likely to be in short supply, and the pressure against which resistance may be needed will be considerable, time to address this agenda may be in short supply. With such challenges, and clear indications of common ground between practitioners and analysts working with signed and spoken languages, there is plainly ongoing mutual benefit in dialogue reaching across all corners of the field.

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² <https://aiic.net/page/8604/aiic-recognises-that-conference-interpreters-use-spoken-and-or-sign-languages/lang/1>

³ <https://www.aiicsignlanguage.net/guidelines>