

## **Sign Language Interpreting in South Africa: Meeting the Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The new political dispensation in South Africa has had a marked effect on the development of South African Sign Language. The new Constitution stipulates that sign language has to be promoted and that conditions created for the development and use of sign language. It is in this regard that the development of sign language interpreting in South Africa plays a major role. Because of the Apartheid history of South Africa, the majority of Deaf people in the country have been marginalised and sign language interpreting has never been developed or promoted. In situations where interpreting does take place it is usually done by people with no training. The result of this is that the majority of Deaf people have had inadequate access to services such as medical, legal, welfare, education and other services. This paper aims at giving an overview of the training programme for sign language interpreters developed by the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment at the Free State University in collaboration with the Deaf Federation of South Africa (DEAFSA). The current situation, needs, problems and challenges, are discussed and a brief exposition of the pilot training course format and content is given. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the course and recommendations.

### **Sign Language Interpreting in South Africa: Status Quaestionis**

#### *South African Sign Language*

South African Sign Language (SASL) can be defined as a visual-gestural language that has been created and is used by Deaf South Africans to communicate with one another (Akach & Morgan 1997). SASL is a fully-fledged natural human language, equivalent in all ways, structurally and functionally, to every other human language (DEAFSA 1996(a))

As in other countries, oralism dominated education right from the start and the concept of Total Communication was embraced. Based on this philosophy, a book was published by Neider-Heiterman (1980) describing a set of signs used to teach children spoken languages. These signs were based on a manually coded system called the Paget-Gorman system which was developed in Britain to teach children English-on-the-hands. The South African Sign Language Dictionary has also seen the light. The signs in this

dictionary are however not accepted by Deaf people as being representative of the signs they use (Akach & Morgan 1997).

Despite the promotion of oralism or Total Communication and/or Simcom (simultaneous communication with signing and speaking at the same time), SASL continued to develop. The status of SASL has also been elevated by the stipulations contained in the new Constitution of South Africa.

The new Constitution in Chapter 1 Section 6(5)(a) states that:

“A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must-

(a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of-

- (i) all official languages;
- (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
- (iii) sign language;”

It is also further stated in Sections 29, 30 and 31 of the Constitution that everyone has the right to receive education in the language of their choice, to use the language of their choice and to participate in the cultural life of their choice.

The above implies that not only should the status of the language be enhanced but that the Deaf community as a cultural group is entitled to access to all services and spheres such as education, health services, justice, education, television news, etc. Access to these services is often taken for granted, but for many South Africans access has not always been guaranteed. The majority deaf people in South Africa were not only disadvantaged because of their hearing disability, but also as a result of the Apartheid system that was enforced in the country. This implies that in the new democratic dispensation in South Africa the Deaf community does not only have to be enabled to gain access to all spheres of civil society, but is also to be empowered to actively claim its rights as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa. In this regard sign language interpreting and more specifically liaison interpreting, can act as vehicle of empowerment for the Deaf community to have access to all that is taken for granted by the hearing society.

### *Users of SASL*

There are approximately 600 000 South Africans who use SASL. This refers specifically to Deaf people who are identified as sharing the Deaf culture. It also needs to be stated that the majority of these Deaf people live in dire isolation in speech dominated homes (DEAFSA 1996(a)).

A complicating factor is that one out of every three Deaf people in South Africa is illiterate. This means that they cannot communicate and express themselves in any other way than through the means of sign language or a sign language interpreter (Crawhall 1995:2).

### *Sign Language Interpreting in South Africa*

All across the world, sign language interpreters have always been present in the Deaf communities. Traditionally, children of Deaf adults (CODAs) assumed the responsibility of making communication between the Deaf and the hearing communities possible. Besides CODAs, religious workers, teachers and social workers who had acquired, through association with Deaf people, some knowledge of sign language vocabulary and structure, also acted as interpreters. However, this has always been done without any interpreter training. This then also resulted in a situation where these people (interpreters) developed the attitude of the helper towards the helpless (Akach & Morgan 1997).

Up to 1997 there has been no formal training of sign language interpreters in South Africa. Except for a few interpreters, less than five, who have been trained in other countries, there are no trained sign language interpreters in the country (South African National Council for the Deaf 1995).

Deaf people are obliged to make use of the sign language skills of CODAs to act as interpreters. These people, mainly acting as volunteers, are neither trained interpreters and nor skilled in interpreting from spoken to sign language and to do voice-overs. They are also not familiar with the ethics and code of conduct of interpreting (Ceronio 1997).

A further problem in the African communities in South Africa, is that there are almost no CODAs who know sign language as a first language. The reason for this being that the hearing family members often raise the children of Deaf parents (DEAFSA 1996(b)).

Teachers at schools for the Deaf often have to act as interpreters without any training and sign language knowledge and tend to resort to manually-coded sign language (Ceronio 1997).

As people are becoming more aware of sign language and the rights of the Deaf as a minority language group, the interest in sign language interpreting is growing and an even greater need for interpreter training is created. A further development in South Africa is that members of the Deaf community are participating increasingly in political and cultural activities that concern the hearing community as well. The afore-mentioned therefore implies that there is a greater demand for sign language interpreters.

### *The challenges*

From the above exposition of the current situation, it is quite clear that there is an urgent need for sign language interpreters in South Africa.

Welfare, health care, financial and other support services, training and ordinary day-to-day situations where the Deaf person requires information or wants to express an opinion, are still largely inaccessible to the Deaf (Ceronio 1997). Serious problems are also experienced in the courts, at charge offices and even at hospitals where, due to the absence of sign language interpreters, injustices are committed against the Deaf. Even in instances where interpreters are available, the standard of interpreting is unacceptable and therefore aggravating the situation ( DEAFSA 1996(b)) instead of alleviating it.

Besides the stipulations of the new Constitution of South Africa, the policy paper of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), issued in 1993, must be taken cognisance of. It states that:

“We recommend that the WFD call for the right of all individuals to have access to *high quality interpreting* between the spoken language of the hearing community and the sign language of the deaf community. This in turn requires the establishment of *qualified interpreter training programs* and the *establishment of mechanisms in every country* for making *professional interpreters* widely available to deaf individuals” (WFD 1993).

From the above it can be inferred that there is an immediate need for interpreters and the training of the existing interpreters on the one hand a definite need for longer, more comprehensive interpreter training on the other. These needs include liaison, court and conference interpreter training.

Sign language interpreting does not enjoy professional status in South Africa. Actually, interpreting as such is still a very young “profession” in South Africa. Although the process of establishing interpreting as a profession in general is making some head way, it does not enjoy formal recognition. This is a situation that will be remedied in the near future with the provision of comprehensive formal training.

### **Developing a course for sign language interpreters in South Africa**

Based on the needs identified, it was clear that the first objective in the training of sign language interpreters would be to devise interim short term measures to remedy the existing situation. These measures had to focus on providing some assistance and skills to those were already involved in interpreting.

In this regard the Deaf Federation of South Africa (DEAFSA) , an organisation representing the deaf people of South Africa, initiated a pilot training course in collaboration with the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (ULFE) at the University of the Orange Free State in South Africa. The ULFE is at present the only institution in South Africa that provides comprehensive interpreter training. The ULFE has been responsible for the training of the interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Provincial Legislature and the national Parliament. With the training of interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission the ULFE gained invaluable experience in training interpreters in a short period of time.

#### *The pilot training course*

The biggest challenge in designing a short training course was to decide what had to be included in order to make optimum use of the limited time. It was decided that the course would run for four weeks, two weeks contact training at a time, with a two-month period inbetween. Most of the participants could not attend a longer full-time course because of their employment. Financial constraints also played a role because the training course is not subsidised by the state. A shorter course was more affordable.

The knowledge, skill and experience levels of the participants also had to be catered for since they had been nominated by the different provinces and differed vastly in their sign language competence and interpreting experience. A total of 20 trainees attended the course.

In order to make the four week training course feasible, it was decided to focus the training on liaison (community) interpreting.

During the first week aspects such as Deaf culture and the history of sign language were discussed, with the main focus on the linguistics of sign language. The following topics were discussed (Ceronio 1997):

- A comparison between the linguistics of sign language and that of spoken language.
- The importance of a sound knowledge of sign language linguistics for interpreting.
- The development of theoretical models from sign language phonology.
- Phonological variation in terms of South African Sign Language dialects.
- An introduction to morphology (in spoken and sign language)
- The use of classifiers
- Directives and locative verbs.
- Deriving of nouns from verbs.
- Lexicalised finger spelling and borrowed signs.
- Numeric inclusion.
- Compounds.
- Syntax of Sign Language.
- Types of sentences.
- Non-manual markers.

The lectures were very practical and trainees were given as much opportunity as possible to put the lecture content into practice.

The second week primarily focused on liaison interpreting by putting theory into practice. The following issues were addressed:

- A general introduction to interpreting.
- An introduction to liaison interpreting.
- An introduction to the theory of interpreting.
- Discourse analysis.
- Professional and ethical issues.
- Dilemmas facing the sign language interpreter.

These lectures comprised mainly roleplay situations where the trainees had to apply the skills that had been acquired.

At the end of the first two weeks of training the trainees received assignments to complete for the next training session.

The second phase of the training focused primarily on giving the trainees the opportunity to practice their skills in practical situations and to address any problems that they had encountered during their interpreting activities. More specific attention was also given to issues such as:

- An introduction to Public Service and Court interpreting.
- The role and expectations of the service provider.

During the second part of the training course members of the Deaf community were present to assist with the role play exercises. This proved quite valuable as the trainees gained insight into the needs and expectations of the Deaf in an interpreting situation.

The training methodology applied during the four weeks of contact sessions was primarily interactive and experiential. The trainees were briefly introduced to the theory underpinning the various interpreting skills and principles. These were then immediately applied in role play situations. These role play scenes were critically evaluated by the other trainees by pointing out any errors and their correct counterparts. They also had to provide the role play group with the correct or most appropriate interpretation. Besides role play, videos were used extensively to provide examples and to tape the trainees' efforts for self-evaluation. During the second part of the training members of the Deaf community were used in the role play exercises.

At the end of the second two weeks the trainees were evaluated by means of a written test and a practical role play test. The written test evaluated the trainees' knowledge and understanding of theoretical aspects. The practical component evaluated the trainees' mastery of the interpreting and sign language skills as well as the application of liaison interpreting principles. Members of the Deaf community played an important role in the evaluation process by being part of the role play as well as assisting the test panel.

### *Evaluation of the pilot course*

Positive feedback has been received from the interpreters who attended the course. A marked improvement was detected in the interpreters' skills and sign language competence from the first two week session to the second session.

However, certain problems and shortcomings have to be addressed in the design of future training programmes.

The greatest problem concerns the fact that trainees were not screened in any way before they attended the course. All the trainees who had been nominated, were admitted to the course. In this regard it is important to remember that the fact that someone acts as an interpreter is no guarantee that a person indeed possesses the necessary aptitude or skills. The lack of screening resulted in a situation where the trainees varied greatly in their knowledge of and competence in sign language. This makes training problematic as it makes it very difficult for trainers to pitch the content and exercises at such a level as to make it relevant and worthwhile for everyone. Trainees who were not as knowledgeable or experienced as others, felt hesitant to participate in the practical sessions.

Trainees also experienced some difficulty with the linguistics of sign language. Most of the trainees had no knowledge of general linguistics and found it difficult to understand and assimilate the new content.

Furthermore, both trainers and trainees sometimes experienced difficulties with the fact that trainees did not in all cases have the necessary spoken language skills. One of the main reasons for this problem was that the course focused on SASL and English. This was problematic because English was in many cases the second or even third language of the trainees. This had a definite impact on the level at which the course could be conducted. It should be kept in mind that although English is a very important

language in South Africa, there are large parts of the country where very little if any English is used. Consequently some of the trainees had to cope with poor sign language skills as well as limited competence in English. Even trainees who were more competent in sign language struggled with the interpreting process because of their poor English skills.

Besides the problems mentioned above, the most obvious problem or limitation experienced in the course was the short time frame. Although both trainers and trainees were of the opinion that the four weeks made a tremendous difference to their interpreting and sign language skills, the fact of the matter is that it is not sufficient. The four weeks spread over a four month period is too short to accommodate the different levels of knowledge, skills and experience.

Due to the fact that there are very few trained sign language interpreters in South Africa, there is a serious shortage of sign language interpreting trainers. This resulted in a situation where spoken language interpreter trainers had to work in conjunction with two trained sign language interpreters. This problem stands in the way of more institutions becoming involved in the training of sign language interpreters.

### **Implications for the future**

The pilot course can be seen as a first and important step towards the the training of sign language interpreters in South Africa in order to provide for the urgent need for sign language interpreters.

Formal training programmes are a necessity, not only to empower members of the Deaf community, but also to establish sign language interpreting as a profession.

These programmes should be based on a two-pronged approach. Longer training (mostly for conference interpreters) - two to four years - and shorter training courses - six months to a year, the latter to address the immediate demand for sign language interpreters. These shorter courses can also serve as refresher courses for trained interpreters.

From the experience gained from the pilot course, the following issues need to be borne in mind when designing a training course:

- The trainees have to be screened before attending the course. The screening should attempt to determine the linguistic (sign language as well as spoken language) competence of the trainees, as well as their interpreting experience.
- The duration of the course should be determined by the trainees' level of knowledge and experience. Courses should preferably run for at least a year. Shorter *ad hoc* courses should only be seen as interim measures.
- Separate sign language training is strongly suggested to make the practical interpreting courses more effective. Sign language (SASL) should be promoted as a field of study at universities. This could provide an important source of prospective sign language interpreters.
- It is important to realise that not all the trainees have the required aptitude to be trained as conference interpreters.

- Training courses for trainers should be developed. These courses should aim at establishing a core group of trainers to duplicate any new courses at other institutions in the country.

Although the pilot training course as discussed in this paper, was only a starting point in the effort to address a pressing need in South Africa and recognising that it suffered from many shortcomings and limitations, it has, however, put the process in motion. Invaluable experience was gained and the stage is now set for establishing comprehensive sign language interpreting training courses at training institutions in South Africa.



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