

# The Interpreters' Newsletter

Interpreting  
and interpreters  
throughout history

No. 21  
2016

*The Interpreters' Newsletter*

Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio, dell'Interpretazione  
e della Traduzione

Sezione di Studi in Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori (SSLMIT)

Università degli Studi di Trieste

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ISSN: 1591-4127

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# Sign language and interpreting: a diachronic symbiosis

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## Abstract

*In the past when deaf people had no opportunity to learn to read, write or even speak, the aid of ad hoc 'interpreters' was the only means available to communicate with the hearing. This paper seeks to inform practitioners and researchers of spoken language interpreting a little about the historical evolution of interpreting for deaf individuals, about deafness, sign language use, historical developments in deaf education and the emergence of professional sign language interpreting.*

## Keywords

Sign language interpreting, deafness

## Introduction

Since antiquity deafness has accompanied man's evolutionary progress. Deafness from birth or caused by disease or trauma at any stage of one's life may range from slight hearing impairment to total hearing deficiency. Profound deafness affects about 0.4% of the population in Italy of whom 90% are born of hearing parents, 5% of one hearing parent and 5% are CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults) born of two deaf parents (Paoli 2000: 420). Finding data on the number of deaf people worldwide is complex, as deafness varies in its severity and definition. To

most hearing people it means anyone who has poor hearing (generally elderly relatives), but deafness is more complicated than that with different categories and subgroups according to WHO guidelines established in 2001. According to ISTAT (2001)<sup>1</sup>, the Italian statistics agency, there were estimated to be approximately 877,000 Italians between 1999-2000 with some form of hearing impairment from partial to total (15.2 per 1,000), of whom 92,000 were pre-lingual deaf individuals (1.6 per 1,000 Italians). More recent data is unavailable to my knowledge.

It is impossible to calculate whether deafness has increased through the centuries or remained within fixed limits over time; nonetheless, whenever severe or total deafness struck in the past, it left individuals, until not long ago, as outcasts of society, at the mercy of their destiny and with little hope of escaping ridicule, neglect and misery. Even today, in societies with meagre welfare programmes and inadequate or lack of legal provisions for the handicapped, life for a deaf person can imply a constant uphill battle to communicate and be understood, to work and live in dignity like everyone else.

The plight of being unable to hear, and thus emit comprehensible sounds, leads to a complete breakdown of communication and in former times, as often as not, it led the hearing majority to consider the profoundly deaf as mentally retarded, stupid, incapable of logical thought, and lacking any culture or language of their own. This is exemplified by the case of a Scottish woman, reported in the Glasgow Herald of 26<sup>th</sup> September 1817 (mentioned in Kyle/Woll 1985). Deaf and dumb from birth, she was accused of drowning her child by throwing him into a river from a bridge. Her solicitor put up a defence by declaring that because she could not speak and hence communicate, she could not be tried. Unable to speak, she could not possibly distinguish between right and wrong, nor grasp the gravity of the deed. Circumstances changed when an interpreter of sign language was found (the principal of the Edinburgh School for the Deaf) who led the court to pass a verdict of accidental drowning.

#### 1. Early signed language use

The evolution of signed language is ancient indeed and some hypothesise that it may predate spoken language as a form of communication (Armstrong *et al.* 1995; Stokoe 1997). They believe that the human species must have passed through a rudimentary stage of communicating gesturally more than a million years ago. This was before real language began (signed or spoken), before the human brain evolved and became larger and more complex. Both signed and spoken languages are semiotic systems because both gesture and sound can be recognised to represent something else. All around us there are living creatures that use and depend on signs of different nature to communicate with others of their kind; scent to leave a trail, movement to show aggression, sexual attraction, location of food and so on. Primates make signs to each other and it is likely that the first homi-

<sup>1</sup> Data available at [http://www3.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20020313\\_\\_01/salute.pdf](http://www3.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20020313__01/salute.pdf) p. 70 (in Italian).

nids would have done so too. The advantage of walking with an upright posture left them free to possibly make and learn more and more signs with their hands.

There is strong evidence that all infants too use gesture before using language, spoken or signed. Children, whether they can hear or not, make referential imitative gestures to stand for things and actions and it is through gestural communication that a child experiences contact with the world before a real spoken or signed language with its rules of syntax is adopted (Capirci *et al.* 1996).

Despite the likely dominance of signs during the early evolution of mankind and the presence of subtle non-verbal forms of communication and gesticulation which constantly accompany our everyday spoken utterances, today's modern western societies have long suppressed evident or emphatic forms of gestural communication among the general hearing population. Yet numerous contemporary, indigenous, hearing groups have maintained signing systems from the ancient past to use signed language together with spoken, such as the Australian Aborigines and North American Plains Indians:

Since evolutionary theory fostered a perception of sign languages as inferior to spoken languages, "Aborigines" and "Indians" came to share with deaf persons an assumed pathology based on a resort to gestures *instead* of speech (Farnell 2001: 402, original italics).

Plains Sign Talk became a *lingua franca* among all the North American Indian tribes during the eighteen hundreds presumably after centuries of intertribal communication through numerous signed languages. It remains active still today, but is becoming largely confined to elders as English has become the dominant language of the U.S.A. and there is the danger of its possible drastic decline (McKay-Cody 1997: 22). It is used alone or in combination with speech. Farnell (2001) has analysed how the two modalities function together rather than as two separate systems. Kendon (1988) working among hearing Australian Aborigines, found elaborate alternatives to spoken language used for intertribal communication or in particular circumstances, e.g. the case of widowed women who are forced to remain silent for the rest of their lives.

## 2. Sign language and education

Past ignorance of the hearing majority often led to the belief that because most deaf people were incapable of possessing 'normal' language, they could not possibly communicate any intelligent discourse through signs, even if an interpreter were present (see Leahy this issue). An example, recounted by Lane/Battison (1978, cited from Goodrich 1857: 128), describes a scene in 1817 when President Munroe visited a New England school for the Deaf founded by Thomas Gallaudet and a French deaf teacher Laurent Clerc. Gallaudet had met Clerc at the famous Parisian school for the Deaf founded in 1755 by Charles Michel Abbé de l'Épée and where Clerc had taught. Clerc was an educated man, well-mannered with knowledge of English despite his deafness. Gallaudet and Clerc sat near the President on the podium and Gallaudet asked the President to put any question he

pleased to Clerc as he would have willingly interpreted in sign language. Gallaudet secretly hoped to convince the President that sign language was a true language for communication. Everyone waited for the question to arrive, but as the seconds passed, Gallaudet repeated his request to question Professor Clerc on any matter that teased Monroe's curiosity. Again silence reigned. The President meditated, shuffled in his chair, and regained a pensive expression, as if lost in profound philosophical considerations to solicit some deeply meaningful question. Time passed by and he seemed on the verge of dozing, when suddenly he said, "Ask him... ask him..., how old he is!"

In Europe, signed languages began to be adopted in special classes or schools for deaf children after Charles Michel Abbé de l'Épée discovered how to exploit the natural signs used among his deaf pupils in order to teach them French. The Paris School he founded started with two deaf sisters and grew to 68 pupils at the time of his death in 1783 (Lane/Battison 1978: 71, cited from Peet 1857: 295). His methodology was introduced across the Atlantic by Laurent Clerc, where French Sign Language (FSL) merged with the existing signed languages of American deaf communities to form what is now called ASL (American Sign Language).

Several Italian historical references have been written on sign language, with an emphasis on deaf education and educators (cf. Corazza 1991, 1993; Dallasta 1997; Porcari Li Destri/Volterra 1995; Pigliacampo 2001; Radutzky 1995, 2000a, 2000b; Volterra 1992). Italian educators like the French also became interested in the use of sign language in deaf education and Abbot Tommaso Silvestri was sent to France to study the famous French method. He returned to open a school at Casa di Pietro in Rome in 1784 but later abandoned signs in favour of oralism (Boggi Bosi 1939; Pierini 1902, cited in Radutzky 1983: 153). Padre Ottavio Assarotti established a teaching method in Genoa in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that was based on mime and caught on in several Italian cities (Grimandi 1960; Picanyol 1941, cited in Radutzky 1983: 153). A debate emerged between educators and ear specialists in the Italic peninsula in the 1800s as oralist methods began to gain the upper hand (Facchini/Rismondini 1983) in tandem with what was happening in other parts of Europe at the time. There remained relatively few schools for deaf children in Europe that continued to use sign language, as oral teaching methods took a firm hold. Even Charles Michel Abbé de l'Épée declared that there were no insurmountable obstacles to teaching sound articulation and lip reading to the deaf but he preferred the use of sign language. A few schools followed in his steps including the school founded by Gallaudet in the United States. However, after 1843, when two American teachers visited deaf schools in Germany and returned enthusing over oral methodology in their education, even Gallaudet's school partially succumbed to oral instruction (Lane/Battison 1978: 75-76).

In 1870 Alexander Graham Bell (the inventor of the telephone) added a new voice to the oralist movement as a firm opponent of sign language and even marriage between deaf people. He firmly believed that deaf Americans should learn only English (Mitchel 1971, cited in Lane/Battison 1978: 76). At the time, American opposition to the oralist method was led by Edward Gallaudet, son of Thomas, who was later to become Rector of Gallaudet College for the Deaf in Washington D.C. from 1857 to 1910 (Lane/Battison 1978: 76). Oralist methodol-



ogy began to take a firm hold in Europe and because deaf children were forced to learn the language of the hearing majority, there was 'theoretically' no real need for interpreters.

As described by Lane/Battison (1978: 76-77), at the 1878 universal exhibition in France oralists held the *First International Conference for the Deaf*, a meeting of instructors for the Deaf, at which they declared that only oralism could lead to the integration of deaf people within society, and that signed language was to be simply considered an auxiliary teaching aid. They formed a commission of 12 to prepare for the *Second International Conference* in Milan, or *International Congress*, as this historic event is now referred to, which took place in 1880. Milan was chosen as the venue because in that city there already existed two renowned schools for deaf children that had converted from signing to oralism. During the event 'international' delegates, seven-eighths of whom were from Italy and France, on visiting the two Milanese schools were struck by what they saw and learned, even though some critics later claimed that the visits had been expertly 'prepared' to favour the oralist method. A resolution was voted almost unanimously by the 164 delegates in favour of the use of spoken language in deaf education. Superiority of the voice over sign was declared, affirming the oral method as the best one (Kyle/Woll 1985: 42). From then on, for almost a century, the teaching of signed languages was hindered and most schools for the Deaf in America and Europe became oralist, effectively banning the use of signs in the classroom (cf. Dotter/Kellett Bidoli 2017, on Austria and Italy).

The adoption of oralism drastically changed the deaf school system. For example, in the United States in 1867 there were 26 schools for the Deaf (with ASL as the language of instruction). By 1907, the number had risen to 139 but ASL was no longer used (Lane/Battison 1978: 75). In general, in the period between the two World Wars, European states adopted a policy of marginalisation of minority languages, including signed languages, in favour of those languages spoken by the majority of the population at school. For example, in 1918 there were 147 Lithuanian schools in Poland but by 1941 only two. Thus, the Deaf as well as hearing minorities suffered the social, economic and political consequences of an inferior education, as they had to learn through a foreign spoken language, difficult for them to comprehend (*ibid.*).

Just as sign language was rejected, so Sign Language Interpreting (SLI) was continually ignored and discouraged, there being no need for it. Of course, 'self-instructed interpreters' continued to offer sporadic aid when requested in the secrecy of the home, but they continued to be the hearing offspring of deaf parents, hearing relatives, clergy who seized the role of 'saviours of the Deaf' or social assistants and charity workers (Dominique/Ingram 1978: 81).

### 3. The development of 'interpreting' for deaf people

Interpreting into and from a signed language must have existed from ancient times, but was 'invisible' and largely hidden from the public domain until only very recently. The only help profoundly deaf and severely hard of hearing people could find in order to communicate with the hostile outside world was sought, as mentioned, through close relatives who learnt to use signs developed and understood at home, or also with the aid of rare charitable individuals and religious workers who found the compassion to help the less fortunate in society. Signing tended to be confined to the home or within small isolated groups and communities, which led to the development of home-based sign systems, signed idioms and dialects. Even today, signing varies considerably from one country to another, from one geographical area to another, and in some cases, from region to region, from city to city, and even within neighbourhoods or between generations. Italy is a case in point. The richness and variety of Italian signs is so great and widespread, it is little wonder that although Roman Sign Language varieties (derived mainly from signs adopted in different deaf residential schools) have become the basis for LIS (*Lingua di Segni Italiana*), the national Italian standard form (which is being promoted through research, conferences, interpreter services, LIS courses and workshops), it may still cause occasional perplexity among non-Roman deaf individuals. My own experience has taught me how difficult it is for hearers to learn to follow Italian deaf signers. To the inexperienced beginner the gesture appears to be very fast, one's eyes concentrate on only part of the movement and miss whole word- or sentence-signs, one's visual concentration is insufficient to capture slight nuances and the 'pronunciation' can vary enormously from person to person. I began to learn sign language with a deaf teacher from the north-eastern city of Trieste where the sign language, for historical reasons, has more in common with neighbouring Austrian, Slovene or central European signed languages rather than central or southern Italian forms<sup>2</sup>. The following year my new teacher came from Padua and it was like having to switch from French to Greek; I had to start all over again, because so many signs were completely different (for example, months of the year or colours). My third instructor, although from the north, tried to keep to standard LIS and therefore, I had to adapt yet again.

2 For over 500 years Trieste was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire comprising Germanic, Slavic and Italian speaking citizens. In 1382 it came under the protection of Leopold III of Habsburg and through time absorbed varied cultural and linguistic traits from the vast outlying territories to become a prosperous city and main port of the Empire by the eve of World War I. In 1915 the UK, France and Russia signed an agreement to cede the city to Italy and it was occupied by Italian troops on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1918 (cf. Dotter/Kellett 2017).

#### 4. Sign language interpreting as a profession

It was in the 1960s that interpreting for deaf people began to gain recognition as a profession; first in the U.S.A. and later elsewhere. Professional SLI is a relatively recent addition to the various spoken interpreting modes that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; *chuchotage*, consecutive, simultaneous, *liaison*, dialogue, etc. Its evolution was lengthy, 'silent', and almost imperceptible, contrasting substantially with the more diversified, better documented evolution of spoken interpreting modes which evolved naturally and 'openly' over time (cf. Kellett Bidoli 1999).

Different forms of spoken language 'interpreting' have existed since the dawn of time (Delisle/Woodsworth 1995), but interpreting, as intended in the modern sense of the word, is relatively young as a profession in the long history of mankind. Although 'interpreting' with signed languages existed in parallel to spoken language interpreting, it is even younger as a recognised professional skill. Documentation referring to past 'interpreters' of signed language in Italy, as elsewhere, is scarce. French, German, Italian and English documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries testify to how sign language usage evolved from those times to the present, especially in reports, articles, and books written by educators of the deaf in Europe and North America. Signed languages in those times were ill-tolerated; it emerges that there was a systematic attempt to try and banish signing altogether. Signed languages were not considered languages as such and, therefore, as the Deaf were forced to learn to use 'proper' language, there was no need for interpreters.

Professional SLI gained a foothold in the U.S.A. and U.K. in the 1960s. Through linguistic research (Stokoe 1960, 1972; Stokoe *et al.* 1965; Bellugi/Klima 1972; Stokoe 1972; Battison 1974; Friedman 1976), the extent of the problem of communication between the deaf and hearing worlds became more apparent and it was realised finally how essential interpreting is for mediation between these two different realities, in the same way interpreters have always bridged the gap between spoken languages and cultures. Furthermore, research in the 1970s showed that deaf children who used a signed language from birth obtained better results at school and had fewer psychological and social problems compared to those who used an oral method or learned to sign later on in life. Moreover, no negative effects were found in their various stages of linguistic development (Mindel/Vernon 1971; Schlesinger/Meadow 1972, cited in Murphy 1978).

The advancement of sign language research proceeded at varying rates throughout the world. In Italy, the first studies were conducted in the 1980s at the CNR (Italian National Research Council) in Rome (Volterra 1981; Attili/Ricci Bitti 1983; Volterra 1987). Though numerous signed 'dialects' abound in the country, as explained, it was natural for Rome-based researchers to start investigation into Roman varieties. They began gathering signs which are recognisable in other parts of Italy, to form a corpus which has increasingly become recognised as the 'official' Italian Sign Language (LIS). Although to this day there is no legal recognition, LIS is the most frequently encountered form of signing on Italian television or in dictionaries of Italian signs (cf. Angelini *et al.* 1991; Magarotto 1995; Romeo 1991, 1997).

Worldwide, research into deafness and signed languages has raised awareness within deaf minority groups and among hearers of the importance of learning signed languages and of the needs of people with varying degrees of hearing deficit who are taking a more active role in asserting their rights in society. Ladd (2003) contrasted the medical concept of 'deafness' with the novel and innovative concept of 'Deafhood', which is essentially self identification with deafness by each and every deaf individual. He drew parallels between deaf cultures and the cultures of other linguistic minority groups in their struggle for recognition.

As research proceeded in the U.S.A. and signing became widely accepted as the natural language of deaf people there, interpreting services began to develop. The United States Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) was founded in 1964 to determine the professional interpreter's role and functions, as well as set guidelines for the profession. Since then, steps have been taken in improving training methodologies and establishing evaluation procedures for confidential interpreter certification in all American states (e.g. Solow 1981; Roy 2005; Swabey/Malcom 2012). Regular conferences are organised and publications offered by the RID on all aspects of SLI<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, worldwide there are still too few national registers of professional interpreters. In Italy, despite the growing demand for SLI over the past 20 years, there is no official register.

At the NATO Symposium *Language, Interpretation and Communication*, held in Venice in September 1977, leading experts on deaf issues and SLI were invited along with the numerous experts on mainstream spoken language interpreting to illustrate the pioneering American experience that was already well under way (cf. Gerver/Sinaiko 1978). On that occasion Lane/Battison (1978: 77-78) appealed to:

Let us undo in Venice what was done in Milan. Let us set right in 1977 what was set wrong in 1880. Let us, in this international symposium on language interpretation, affirm that no language is incontestably superior to any other, that every language is the priceless heritage of all mankind, that we particularly cherish the free use and development of minority languages precisely because they are subject to repression at the hands of the majority.

Just as FSL had crossed the Atlantic in the 1800s from Europe, the newly emerging SLI profession was to cross back a hundred years later to spread throughout the world. By the 1990s interpreter services for the Deaf were developing and expanding, catering principally to community related needs, some now well-established, others still at early stages of development or planning. Unfortunately, though, in many parts of the globe interpreting services were and still are inadequate or struggling for recognition because of official disregard or lack of funds (Erasmus 1999; Napier 2009).

In Italy SLI has finally evolved into a true profession despite no official parliamentary recognition of LIS as a minority language. Gone are the days when the only 'interpreters' available were family members or charity workers who at-

3 A comprehensive collection of citations from 1966 to 1997 on sign language interpreting, mainly in the U.S.A., is provided by Patrie/Mertz (1997).

tempted to mediate, often adding personal opinions or omitting a good portion of the original message (Girardi 2000). After research began in Rome at the CNR in the 1980s, the first courses and workshops for LIS interpreters were offered, mainly with CNR collaboration or that of the Italian National Deaf Association (Bonomo/Celo 2014/2010: 124). 'Second generation' interpreters were thus born and not necessarily people in previous close contact with the Deaf. The Italian general public finally became aware of the existence of SLI for the first time when news bulletins in LIS appeared regularly at 11.30 on a private television channel (Rete4) in 1993, and a year later on the RAI 1 channel early each morning (Franchi/Maragna 2013: 167).

## 5. Closing remarks

This paper has attempted to briefly explain the general lack of any evident historical evolution of professional SLI in its various forms (standard or dialect) in North America and Europe until relatively recent times. In the U.S.A., SLI as a profession is now over fifty years old, elsewhere it is much younger and even in its infancy (e.g. Kosovo, cf. Hoti/Emerson 2009; or Fiji, cf. Nelson *et al.* 2009). It consists of the simultaneous translation from source language to target language across visual-gestural and vocal modes of communication. Professional spoken language interpreters have long been required to know more than one foreign language. In some circles, such as the European Institutions (European Parliament or Commission), the more languages mastered by interpreters the better. However, SLI has traditionally only catered for bi-directionality between voice and sign.

The emergence of English as the dominant form of oral communication in the world since the Second World War for trade, diplomacy and the dissemination of scientific knowledge has made it inevitable that non-English speaking deaf communities of practice are ever more frequently exposed to it (cf. Kellett Bidoli 2014). Contact with spoken English, be it at school or university (conferences and lectures), or encountered abroad for business or travel, poses a major obstacle to deaf people from non-English-speaking countries who have had a hard-enough struggle to master their own national standard spoken language. Thus, a new challenge for sign language interpreters is emerging: signing with English as a third language (cf. Ochse/Kellett Bidoli 2008; Crasborn/van Dijken 2009). For example, Italian sign language interpreters are now finding they have to interpret occasionally from spoken American or British English directly into LIS, or in relay through a second interpreter from English to spoken Italian to LIS. They may even be required to interpret from ASL or BSL (British Sign Language) at conferences now that contact with international deaf researchers is becoming commonplace through cheaper travel facilities and more frequent teaching/research staff exchanges.

Great progress has been made from the distant past when 'interpreters' for deaf people could offer only partial or sporadic aid to communication in the hearing world. Today, not only are sign language interpreters trained in various institutions to interpret to and from sign with their spoken mother tongue, but

many are beginning to acquire interpreting skills in a third spoken language. This, together with the training of deaf interpreters between different signed languages, certainly promises new horizons and challenges for the future history of SLI.

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