WFD AND WASLI STATEMENT ON USE OF SIGNING AVATARS

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This statement from the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is concerned with the way in which decisions on where and when to use signing avatars as a form of access to spoken or written content is being managed by public authorities. The difference in linguistic quality between humans and avatars is why WFD and WASLI cautions against the use of signing avatars as a replacement for human signers. This statement is to advise on processes with how and when to determine appropriate use of signing avatars.

Signed languages are fully-fledged languages with their own complex structures that are distinct from spoken languages, and are not a communication tool. Thus a word-to-sign exact translation is not possible, as any translation needs to take into account the context and the cultural norms. Computer generated machine translations cannot render culturally appropriate translations as would be provided by live interpretations from a human sign language interpreter.

Computer generated 3D avatars have the potential to provide alternative opportunities to render publicly available information that is in written text or spoken into a signed language. Work in this field has seen great improvements with the image quality and appearance of signing avatars. Whilst the technology has progressed and offers real potential for wider use of signing avatars, these computerised products do not surpass the natural quality and skill provided by appropriately trained and qualified interpreters and translators. Individuals who are fluent in a signed language and qualified to present information on particular subjects not only use the hands, arms, shoulders and torso, movements of the head, facial expression and mouth patterns, but also include cultural information where necessary to convey the intended meaning contained within a message.

WFD and WASLI jointly express particular concern where avatars are used when the information being delivered is live, complex or of significant importance to the lives of deaf citizens such as news broadcasts, public emergency announcements, or political announcements.

To date, machine translations have yet to emulate the human ability in creating a live interpretation (spoken or signed). Currently, it is not possible to provide an accurate live interpretation via a signing avatar as:

1. Direct word–for-sign translations often do not exist. Achieving equivalence relies on more than just lexical word-sign matches. Any translation or interpretation must consider how to convey the message in terms of the lexicon (words/signs), grammar (structure), semantics (meaning) and discourse (language use).

2. Translators and interpreters take time to prepare in order to fully understand a message and to give consideration to their target audience. An automated translation will not be able to take other sociolinguistic and sociocultural factors into account in order to ensure that the intent of the message sender, and the goals of the message receiver, are achieved.

3. Collections of online sign language dictionaries are still emerging and do not contain full digitised corpus of possible signs (including variants stemming from different socio-linguistic categories), therefore there is not the digital resource available for generating signed statements by avatars.

4. There is a misconception that avatars can produce more accurate translations because there is no human element involved, but accurate, contextually meaningful translations or interpretations cannot be produced without a human involved.

We recognise that avatars might be used for pre-recorded static customer information, for example, in hotels or train stations where instructions might be given about where to check in or queue up. This is acceptable as long as deaf people have been involved in advising on the appropriateness of the signed sentences, and that there is no interaction or 'live' signing required.

Further background on the WFD Statement on Sign Language Work can be seen here. This Statement emphasises that it is important for sign language work to be done with leadership of deaf native sign language users and WFD Ordinary members; it is important also to note that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires governments to ensure that people with disability can express themselves freely, including in sign language. The WFD believes that any sign language work should reflect all the different signs used by a language community. Therefore, sign language dictionary work should always document all the different signs and their variations that deaf people in a community or area use. It is not advisable to pick only one sign for one word when documenting sign languages. The WFD and WASLI therefore does not support any formal standardization activities related to any sign language, but supports appropriately qualified linguistic research into and documentation of all sign languages in the world.

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