Sign language translation for support of hearing-impaired individuals using pose approximation methods, artificial intelligence algorithms, and result correction with large language models

The successes achieved in the field of natural language processing have opened up numerous doors before us. Voice-based assistants are not only useful, but they often introduce revolutionary functionalities into our lives. Nowadays, artificial intelligence-based voice-to-text models are capable of recognizing text from virtually any language, and thanks to recent advancements in natural language processing, there are no boundaries for users and developers. However, the previous statement is a significant distortion of the truth. Globally, approximately 1.5 billion people are hearing impaired, and more than 70 million people use sign language as their primary means of communication. For them, these functionalities are either not available in their „own language”, or only in a limited manner. Sign language, particularly finger-spelling, is a special form of communication often used for communicating names, addresses, and phone numbers, or conveying concepts without standard gestures. An experienced signer can spell almost twice as fast as an individual typing on a virtual keyboard, let alone when using all available signs for communication. Hence, there is an urgent need to create an interface that is comfortable for them to use.

An even more significant issue arises in the realm of communication. Machine translation between spoken languages is widely available to those with internet access in various formats. We have long surpassed simple dictionary-based translators, and with the rise of different transformers and large language models, communication between virtually any language has long become a reality. However, sign language even today remains an exception. No solution on the market assists signers in communicating with non-signing individuals. The progress in this area is hindered by the fact that sign language, like its verbal counterparts, is not standardized. Almost every nation has its own sign language, not to mention regional variations and dialects. Furthermore, the task is complicated by the fact that the available large and high-quality datasets are minuscule compared to what is customary in classical natural language processing.

My work contributes to the development of sign language translation systems accessible to the broader masses. I have conducted research encompassing various aspects, including glove-based recognition and traditional image processing methods. However, my primary focus was directed towards the comprehensive exploration of using pose approximation algorithms. While the latter is highly promising as it compresses visual data effectively, enabling the construction of large, homogeneous databases, the question of whether current technology is capable of reliably encoding all the information needed for translation has so far remained open.

Within American Sign Language, I separately explored finger-spelling and general sign language possibilities, paying close attention to solutions working from both snapshots and motion sequences. Without aiming for completeness, I compared convolutional, recurrent, LSTM, and Transformer network architectures adapted for the task. Due to the grammatical characteristics of sign language, auxiliary verbs are missing, and the word order is often different from traditional English when translated word by word. Therefore, I processed the results contextually using generative large language models and employed them to enhance the quality and reliability of the translation.

In my thesis, I walk through the steps of data collection, provide details about the applied artificial intelligence algorithms, and analyze the design decisions and their alternatives that emerged during development. Furthermore, I present the comprehensive solution I've developed, offering significant support for communication with the hearing impaired.