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Sign Languages as Disaster Entertainment

Pandemic
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Sign language interpreters have become social media celebrities of our coronavirus moment. But signing is not a form of light entertainment; it should be lifesaving information.

Dutch health minister Hugo de Jonge paused in the middle of a somber press briefing on COVID-19. As he admonished Dutch citizens to not hoard, or *hamsteren*, which literally means stuffing one's cheeks like a hamster, he swung his head back to the signing woman behind him (@EuropeansPod, March 31, 2020). His gaze, and the collective gaze of his audience, landed upon the sign language interpreter. How would she interpret hamsteren? What comedic relief might she provide in this stressful moment?

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In recent years, whenever disaster strikes, a storm bears down on deaf people as media outlets cast a spotlight on the embodiment of our difference. Sign language interpreters (SLIs) are among the "essential workers" of the current COVID-19 pandemic, appearing alongside health officials and politicians at live press conferences across the world. Moving hands, seemingly distorted faces, chins set at awkward angles, shoulders askew, tongues sticking out, eyes crossed. The dynamic actions of language rendered comically chaotic to the nonsigner's gaze. Into the formal order of orderly figures, dais, and flag steps the unwitting court jester.

Clarity of information matters to us all, as we are mutually responsible for one another's health and well-being. As deaf people agitate for access to critical public health information in sign languages and cobble together their own resources, media and popular audiences have instead transformed

access work into spectacle: bodies turned unruly. Screens are now awash with video clips, photographs, and memes presenting our work as comical theatrics, a pageantry of disability and otherness. Sign languages become clickable amusements, a momentary diversion from the stark reality of a global pandemic. Media and popular audiences continue to treat SLIs as displays on the fringe of a terrifying reality of overwhelmed health care systems and debilitated economies, while the fascination with SLIs positions deaf people and sign languages as *other.*

On March 16, 2020, a chisel-chinned Nigel Howard—a deaf American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter and holder of looks reminiscent of a 1950s white Hollywood star—became an overnight household sensation. Whoa. How can a deaf person interpret? We'll leave the **technical explanation** to other experts (see the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers website), but deaf interpreters are often used when the goal is absolute and unmistakable clarity. Howard leapt to fame following an appearance in a **live press conference** alongside Adrian Dix, British Columbia's health minister, and Dr. Bonnie Henry, the provincial health officer. Circulating on social media were animated GIFs of his signing, an illustrated cartoon, linguistic analyses, and a Facebook fan club.

Two such GIFs that were edited out of context and labeled with inaccurate and even vulgar titles are "gang signs" and "this big." The GIFs play an endless loop of visually misleading impressions of a man throwing gang signs and making sexually suggestive comments. In the "gang signs" meme, Howard appears to be holding up two hands to his chest, index and pinky finger extended while his head leans backward. In the "this big" meme, Howard holds up two index fingers several inches apart. In fact, Howard's actions translate as "something sticks to the body" and "two people stand apart" respectively. We collectively sigh. Occasionally, you'll see one of us tiredly correcting such deliberate misimpressions. That's not what it means. No. Really. These flying hands, protruding tongue, and twisting body parts are not distortions. They are the particular movements of sign language, a full-fledged grammar, a deeply coded, complex system that native signers intuitively understand and new learners take years to master.

One far less offensive GIF is titled "**Wash Your Hands Nigel Howard**." In a mere 1.65 seconds, Howard relays "Washing hands is absolutely necessary." (We wonder how long it would take a speaker to say that in English). Talk about hands-down effective. He looks like he's just mimicking the act of washing our hands. Even a gorilla could do that—ask Koko **(see Morin 2015)**.

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Pamela Wright, a deaf signer, posted a linguistic analysis of this GIF to unpack the complexity of the utterance (Wright 2020). The action of washing hands is made simultaneously with the visible mouthing of the onset of the English word "wash." Howard holds hands with a discernible shift in face and head: He leans his head to his left, blinks his eyes, furrows his eyebrows, and presses his lips together, then nods several times to emphasize the gravity of the situation and to affirm washing hands as a preventive measure. Then he shakes his head slightly to indicate that this measure is nonnegotiable. Finally, he completes the utterance with a sign translated as "must," co-occurring with the visible mouthing of the English word "must." What renders this sign salient is that it's prototypically produced as a one-handed sign, but Howard produced it as two-handed, effectively underscoring the sense of obligation.

The visibility of Howard's interpretation at a high-profile live press conference was double-edged. Many deaf ASL signers lauded him for his fluency and for facilitating crucial access to the stream of news about the pandemic. At the same time, the media spotlight prompted nonsigning viewers to transform him into a series of flying hands and bodily contortions for their own entertainment.

Sign language linguistics occupies the periphery of the general purview of linguistics in the academy, which contributes to ignorance about the grammatical structures of sign languages. This ignorance is compounded with deep-rooted ideologies that equate language with spoken speech (see Bauman 2008). We deaf people have always existed and our natural languages have been transmitted through deaf families and friends, social and professional spaces, and educational institutions. Yet it was only some 50-odd years ago that ASL was heralded a full-fledged, bona fide language with its own grammar and vocabulary, not a visual derivative of English on the hands or an auxiliary method of nonverbal communication.

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Another image circulating on social media features a deaf SLI, Jesse Conrad, at a press conference in Maryland. Conrad stands next to a solemn person looking down at the podium. His tongue is sticking out, his eyes are crossed, and he is posed as if he were fleeing danger. The caption accompanying the image, "Gov Hogan says not to panic… I feel like the sign language interpreter is delivering a different message!" suggests that the interpreter's bodily distortions betray the governor's intention to maintain public calm. The caption also reveals flat-out ignorance about the role of facial expressions in sign languages: they are used to encode grammatical and affective functions, and they also co-occur with other nonmanual elements, i.e. the body, and with manual

signs. This is equivalent to how spoken languages convey affect through pitch, voice quality, and volume, and how they combine these features with words. Although some of the nonmanual markers of sign languages can resemble the nonmanual actions of nonsigning hearing speakers, especially when they gesture, the former is more systematic and obligatory than the latter, and interacts with manuals in complex ways that require years of experience for learning, ideally from birth. At best, nonsigners can guess at the meaning of individual signs by taking them out of context and mapping them to recognizable actions in the real world, or tapping into their unrestrained imagination. The commentator who created this still and caption might think a panic should break out, but in all likelihood Conrad was simply conveying exactly what the governor was saying.

The phenomenon of interpreters being co-opted as sources of entertainment vis-à-vis viral images is neither new nor unusual. Hurricane Sandy thrust **hearing ASL interpreter Lydia Callis** into the spotlight with calls for her face to become the mayor of New York City **(*Daily Beast* 2012)**. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa film stills circulated of New York interpreter Jonathan Lamberton resembling a moaning zombie with his arms outstretched **(Evans 2014)**. Now the Covid-19 pandemic has generated a news cycle afresh about expressive, distracting, funny, and (in)appropriate SLIs.

Many deaf people are lauding this increased visibility as significant progress toward the inclusion of deaf people in public life and as a fundamental recognition of deaf people's human rights. But the fascination with SLIs and sign languages eclipses the failure of many press conferences, especially national ones, to provide qualified SLIs for relaying updated information about the current pandemic. In India, the India National Association of the Deaf (India NAD) has been lobbying for qualified sign language interpreters on screen for government briefings, complaining about unintelligible fake interpreters **(@inda_nad, May 12, 2020)**. This also encourages us to think about interpretation as a form of entertainment and thus perhaps be more resistant to providing interpreters as a measure of access. Because it doesn't seem as serious as it should be. And because the rapid, vigorous, and ostensibly comic nature of sign languages does not fit the performance of political decorum in moments of crisis.

The provision of SLIs is not consistent across the globe. For example, Lynn Stewart-Taylor (**@jerseysnail** on Twitter) led a hashtag campaign, **#WhereIsTheInterpreter**, in the United Kingdom to protest the British government's failure to provide consistent access to information about COVID-19 via sign language interpretation for the country's more than 87,000 deaf citizens. On May 21, the government finally conceded to providing a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter. In the United States, the White House has so far not responded to calls to provide a SLI for its televised briefings, including those by its coronavirus task force. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo only started providing SLIs for his daily press conferences under the orders of a federal judge, after several deaf

people sued for inaccessibility. Elsewhere, especially in the Global South, SLIs are few and far between or unqualified. Sure, briefings might offer closed captioning, or as some of us like to call them, craptions. Craptions often happen when the subtitles overly rely on the audio provided for accuracy. The quality can be awful, particularly live. In such matters of life or death as a global pandemic, none of us should be forced to rely on the misinformation produced by craptions or the old-school telephone line of collectively shared information. If you've played the telephone game, you know how the message becomes unrecognizable by the time it reaches the last person. Even when captions are good quality, they do not offer enough clarity for deaf people, as they omit the affect of the original message.

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Although access has been pushed out in official spaces, deaf people have pushed back by co-creating collective access. In the United Kingdom, **www.deafukcoronavirus.com**, provides access to information in British Sign Language. India NAD has also made COVID-19 information available in their national sign language, Indian Sign Language. Facebook pages, **Deaf in Scrubs** and **Partners in Deaf Health**, provide medical and scientific information from deaf medical professionals in sign languages and advocate for awareness of the health needs of culturally deaf people. SLIs volunteer to post videos of interpreted work or live interpretations on social media. And scholars and interpreters alike have objected to what human factors engineer Kathryn Woodcock, who is deaf, has described as a fetishization and "celebrityifying" of interpreters by the media **(@safeandsilent, April 8, 2020)**. In fact, many deaf people have asked that the media stop interviewing interpreters about their lives and start talking to deaf people about *access*.

The unruly distortion of sign languages is not only the result of happenstance glimpses at an opportune moment of communication. Photographers, editors, and reporters showcase such images. Social media users curate GIFs and manipulate images for recirculation to highlight such embodied differences. These actions transform our marker of difference—sign languages—into a spectacle for consumption and pleasure, all the while cutting us off from access to information and endangering our safety and well-being.

The unruly distortion of sign languages pushes us to redirect attention to deaf people's ongoing activism for collective access, which has yet to receive the same amount of attention. We also feel pressed to push the academy to reassess itself for accessibility and to take up moral responsibility

to educate people about the marginalization and exclusion of deaf people and sign languages. This calls for *cripping* the academy to rethink how we talk and do not talk about embodied differences (see Robinson and Henner 2018). Disabilities should not be distorted for chuckles. Rather, disabilities need to be recognized as an integral part of the fabric of our lives. We do not exist just for entertainment—we are here with our own lives like everyone else, trying to survive in the middle of the pandemic.

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Image description: Grey text reads "PANDEMIC" on a black background. Layered on top are illustrations of individuals performing common activities during lockdown: one person carries an armful of toilet paper, a pair of people have a book open, one person sits in front of a computer screen displaying an emoji with a heart, and another person bakes bread.
Caption: Scenes from stay-at-home life by Charlotte Hollands, produced for the PANDEMIC issue of Anthropology News magazine.

Charlotte Hollands created artwork as well as spot illustrations of experiences from social distancing life for *AN*'s pandemic issue. Hollands is an illustrator, artist, and ethnographer who is

developing new ways to use illustration within social science research and is currently completing her first graphic nonfiction book, written by Alisse Waterston.

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