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# SIGNED LANGUAGE INTERPRETING

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## Introduction

In the broader field of interpreting studies, the discipline of signed language interpreting can no longer be regarded as being in its infancy. A rapidly evolving field, recognition of the work of signed language interpreters, and indeed the status of the signed languages of deaf people, are still emerging in some parts of the world, while in other regions the field has matured considerably, with significant gains made over the past 20 years in particular. The increased professionalization of signed language interpreters, the innovative scholarly work being undertaken in the field, and the introduction of higher education teaching and learning opportunities for signed language interpreters have changed both practice and pedagogy noticeably in recent decades.

This chapter will present a brief overview of signed languages and the Deaf community in order to establish a social context for the history and evolution of signed language interpreting. The application of signed language interpreting in different settings will be outlined, the cognitive and physical demands of working in different language modalities will be highlighted, education and training issues will be explored, and research with practical implications for signed language interpreting pedagogy and practice will be addressed in this chapter. The steps taken towards the professionalization of the field and relevant trends in recent years will be described, and recommendations will be made for the future.

### *Definition of key terms*

Signed languages: Signed languages are visual-gestural languages. Signed languages evolve naturally in Deaf communities, and signers use conventional and mutually agreed-upon symbols (that is, signs) to communicate with each other. Signed languages have their own grammar and lexicon, not based on the spoken language of the country or region where the community is located. Signed languages are not universal. They are real languages, with a complete set of linguistic structures, complex and highly nuanced, and are as sophisticated as natural spoken languages.

Signed language interpreting: Signed language interpreting is the facilitation of communication between parties who do not share the same language. Frequently the interpretation occurs between signed and spoken language users (e.g. deaf and hearing people); however, at times

signed language interpreters will also work between different signed languages, for example, interpreting from Auslan (Australian Sign Language) to ASL (American Sign Language), or trilingually between two spoken languages and a signed language (e.g. between English, Maori, and NZSL – New Zealand Sign Language). Signed language interpreters are typically hearing, although deaf interpreters are becoming increasingly common in some countries, often specializing in working between signed language pairs and bringing an innate understanding of signed languages and of Deaf culture to the work, as deaf people themselves.

Bimodal: Signed language interpreters work bimodally in that they typically operate between a signed language (using a visual-gestural modality) and a spoken language (using an aural-oral modality). Spoken language interpreters, on the other hand, operate unimodally, whereby both working languages are perceived by the same sensory system (audition).

Deaf/deaf: In referring to deaf people who belong to a linguistic and cultural minority known as the Deaf community, the 'D' may be capitalized in reference to the individual or the group in order to accord respect and deference, e.g. *D*eaf people. This is similar to being referred to as *A*boriginal people, or members of the *M*acedonian community living in Australia. When referring simply to audiological status, i.e. a person with a hearing loss in general, the lower case 'd' as in 'deaf' is the more common usage and will be applied in this chapter.

Signed language acronyms: National and regional signed languages are commonly referred to in the form of acronyms, for example: DGS is Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language); BSL is British Sign Language; LSF is Langue de Signes Française (French Sign Language), and so on.

## Historical perspectives

### *Social and historical aspects of the Deaf community*

In order to provide a context for the work of signed language interpreters and to properly situate this chapter, an overview of the pertinent social and historical issues relevant to the Deaf community and the use of signed language is required. The practice of signed language interpreting in one form or another has probably existed for as long as there have been Deaf communities around the world, whenever there has been a need for interaction and exchange with non-signing people. Natural signed languages arise whenever two or more deaf people come into contact with each other and meet regularly (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006), and references to the use of natural signed languages in society by deaf people have been attributed to both Plato and Socrates (Bauman 2008). A case in point where the development and maturation of a natural signed language has been witnessed is in Nicaragua, where Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua (ISN), or Nicaraguan Sign Language, spontaneously developed when deaf children were brought together for the first time in a central location for schooling purposes after the Sandinista revolution in 1979. Kegl (2002) and Senghas (2003) were able to carefully document the emergence of ISN during the 1980s – a remarkable study of spontaneous language generation by children upon coming together.

A barrier faced by Deaf communities in capturing and recording their language and history in the past has been that signed languages have no written orthography, not unlike a number of indigenous languages. Linguists have recently developed 'sign writing' or 'gloss' systems to be able to record and document signs, but signed languages have no written form in the traditionally understood sense of a writing system. This means that the process of collecting the history of the use of signed language, documenting the development and history of Deaf communities, and recording the evolution of signed language interpreting has been fraught until relatively

recent times. With the invention of film (Krentz 2006), and with improved education standards in Deaf communities, signed language data can now be captured and recorded, and research can be conducted on signed languages and on signed language interpreting.

Some official records, documented mostly by hearing people, do confirm the use of signed languages and interpreters dating back many years. Historical reference to signed language tends to be linked with the establishment of deaf education systems (Stone 2010) in Europe in the 16th through the 18th centuries, and the US in the 19th century, with a few exceptions. For example, Stone and Woll's (2008) investigation of the historical records of the Old Bailey central criminal court in London, England, found clear reference to the first use of a signed language interpreter in that court in 1771. In 1787, a precedent to use a signed language interpreter was 'formally established that if the courts were convinced that a deaf person could understand the proceedings', then it would 'agree to try that person in the normal way' (Colin and Morris 1996: 93), meaning testimony could be given and a person tried via a signed language interpreter (Stone and Woll 2008: 232).

Stone (2010) notes that the first form of signed language interpreter examination in the UK can be documented back to 1928, whereby language facility and interpreting skills were assessed as part of a qualification to work in a welfare service role with deaf people. Other countries do not have formal interpreting assessment procedures or systems that date back quite that far, and indeed the actual formal signed language interpreter *accreditation* system of the UK, separate from the assessment of skill within a welfare worker role, came much later. The US is widely acknowledged for pioneering signed language research and the formal development of signed language interpreter education and training opportunities. The 1960s saw a flurry of activity in this regard, with the first sign linguistics research credited to William Stokoe with a publication in 1960 and the establishment of the signed language interpreters association in the US in 1964 (Ball 2007). Interpreting examinations followed a few years later; the UK and Europe followed suit in the 1970s, and Australia in the 1980s (Johnston and Schembri 2007; Napier *et al.* 2010).

In the period between 1980 and 1990, many civil and political events around the world further changed the Deaf community and resulted in the increasing professionalization of signed language interpreting. An important example drawn from the US is the 'Deaf President Now' (DPN) movement. In March 1988, deaf student activism drew the attention of the world's media to Gallaudet University in Washington DC. Authorized by Congress to confer degrees in 1864 in a bill signed by then President Abraham Lincoln, it is the only liberal arts university for deaf people in the world. However, in the 124 years from 1864 to 1988, the university had never had a deaf president. A highly publicized student movement in 1988 resulted in the appointment of a deaf president and a deaf majority on the Board of Directors (Jankowski 1997).

The visibility in the media of Gallaudet University and the civil action by deaf students during the DPN movement raised the profile of signed language, signed language interpreters, and of deaf people, not only in the US but around the world. Many have likened the protest and affiliated activism to the civil rights actions taken by other oppressed groups, and the DPN movement is seen as a watershed in Deaf history in terms of raising awareness and acknowledging the status and abilities of deaf people, as well as bringing attention to signed language and signed language interpreters (Shapiro 1994). The DPN is recognized for bringing about legislative and social change in the US, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as acts regarding telecommunications access and television captioning bills. It led to an unquantifiable sense of pride and achievement in the Deaf community, potentially breaking down barriers and encouraging deaf people to take up further studies and to enter occupations previously not considered possible for deaf people. This civil rights activity also had an immeasurable impact on signed language

interpreting, with increased enrollment of second language learners in college signed language classes. Another consequence of the new disability anti-discrimination legislation was greater opportunities for interpreters to work with deaf professionals in wider government and community settings.

This increased interest in signed language amongst second language learners has impacted the interpreting field. Many of the early signed language interpreters were hearing members of the Deaf community and often native signers themselves (such as the hearing children of deaf parents). This is very uncommon today, with native signers comprising a very small percentage of the signed language interpreter workforce. The vast majority of practitioners in the signed language interpreting profession today are non-native users of signed language (Bontempo, Napier, Hayes and Brashear 2014; Napier *et al.* 2010). Cokely (2005) expresses concern about the increased social distance between non-native users of a signed language and the Deaf community, noting that many non-native signed language interpreters do not associate with the Deaf community and find it difficult to assimilate cultural norms and to become truly fluent in signed language, affecting their competence and performance as interpreters.

Most of the work of signed language interpreters is from a spoken language to a signed language, meaning signed language interpreters more commonly interpret into their "B" language, rather than working into their native language (refer to Chapter 5 on simultaneous interpreting and Chapter 11 on conference interpreting for discussion of spoken language interpreter directionality). Therefore, bimodal interpreters and unimodal interpreters do not share the same language translation asymmetry (Nicodemus and Emmorey 2013). One of the main reasons for this imbalance in directionality relates to the historically disempowered status of the Deaf community. Society often views deaf people as disabled. This pathological view of deafness sees deaf people as in need of remediation – as people experiencing a loss or deficiency. The sociological perspective of deafness subscribed to by the Deaf community and their allies considers deaf people to be members of a linguistic and cultural minority – signed language users operating in a wider spoken language majority society (this was the certainly the philosophy behind the civil rights action of the DPN movement). Since the broader medical view of deaf people as 'disabled' has prevailed for many years, barriers to education and employment have existed for deaf people, and continue to do so today, particularly in developing countries. This means deaf people may have limited access to signed language interpreters in order to access government services, teaching and learning opportunities and so on.

The environment is changing for signed languages and for deaf people, however. More countries in the world are legally recognizing their national signed language in the constitution or in other government policies and laws. Many countries in the world have become signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, with 137 national governments having ratified the convention (Allen 2013). As the status of signed languages become recognized and Deaf communities around the world become increasingly empowered, the services of signed language interpreters become even more highly valued. Signed language interpreters play a key role in enabling access to information and in equalizing the playing field for deaf people when engaging with hearing people in wider society. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) have entered into a joint agreement, and are involved in a number of community development projects in different developing countries. The goal of these projects is to assist and support deaf people in building capacity in their local Deaf communities, and in running interpreter training to develop the skills of local hearing allies who can play a role in working with the new Deaf Associations that are formed. Whilst such an alliance seems logical, the relationship between deaf people and interpreters has not always been an easy one in the past.

## *The evolution of sign language interpreting*

The field of signed language interpreting as we know it today has its roots in the Deaf community and in the advent of increasingly formalized service provision in Deaf Societies, Centres, Clubs, or Associations around the world. Deaf Societies, or similar charitable institutions initially established to address the social and welfare needs of deaf people, sprang up around the world around 100–150 years ago in many countries, in response to a call from the Deaf community to formalize a meeting place for deaf people (Bontempo and Hodgetts 2002; Napier *et al.* 2010). Often these institutions had a religious focus in the early days, with religious instruction and Bible study held regularly in the first halls and clubrooms of deaf people. Over time, hearing people tended to take over the running of these clubs and gatherings, the organizations became more structured and took on other welfare functions, and the clubrooms became formal organizations responsible for providing services to deaf people.

One of the services provided, even in the early days, was interpretation. Initially this was often provided on an informal basis by the hearing children of deaf adults (known as 'codas' (Bishop and Hicks 2008)), teachers of the deaf, ministers or members of the clergy, and other relatives and friends. Oftentimes suitably skilled hearing people were recruited or selected by respected members of the Deaf community to be nurtured and developed as interpreters. Those with community acceptance would take on the typically voluntary role of interpreting at meetings, community events and gatherings, and in any interactions with government. Deaf people were effectively gatekeepers, deciding who could be trusted and who had the appropriate skills to function in the role of interpreter in their local community (Lee 2010).

With the inception of Deaf Societies, paid 'welfare workers' employed by these organizations started to take on the role of interpreting in the wider hearing community at meetings, appointments and so on, and the need for people drawn from the Deaf community to voluntarily offer their services decreased. The efforts of some of these welfare workers have been criticized in recent years, with the benefit of historical hindsight. Welfare workers often did not 'just' interpret, but would also advocate, negotiate, advise, guide, decide, and so on. Omissions and additions in the interpretation were apparently frequent, creating an uneasy relationship between deaf people and welfare workers/pseudo-interpreters in some settings. Nevertheless, these workers were the first paid professional interpreters in most Deaf communities around the world. Over time, the need to distinguish between the welfare/community worker and the interpreter became more apparent, and eventually these jobs were split, with Departments of Interpreting being set up in many Deaf Societies and Deaf organizations. Training became available, and the face of interpreting in the Deaf community began to change considerably.

With the shift towards professional interpreting, signed language interpreters in many ways modelled their work practices on the existing literature and knowledge regarding spoken language interpreters. At that time, much of the information available pertained to conference interpreting. Although of some merit, generally speaking the transfer of these models and working practices were not a good fit for the work of signed language interpreters, who probably have more in common with interpreters of indigenous languages and languages of limited diffusion (Slatyer 2006) than with those in well-established languages with hundreds of years of a written orthography. This meant that the first formal interpreters in the Deaf community after moving away from the 'welfare' model were very mechanistic, conduit-style interpreters who operated as though they were removed from the setting and the people, and as if they were in an invisible conference booth. There was no recognition of the fact that the interpreter was present in the space, nor any acknowledgement of the influence the interpreter brought to bear in the setting, or how the interpreter impacted the dynamic of a dialogic interaction as a co-constructor of

meaning between a medical practitioner and a patient, for example. This led to the first professional signed language interpreters often being perceived as aloof and cold, and many older deaf people in particular lamented the loss of the old welfare worker/interpreter model.

Over time, as signed language interpreters began to find their way, the extreme pendulum swing from welfare worker to conduit model has settled back in the middle somewhere in the last 15 years or so, with interpreters now considered bilingual, bicultural allies of the Deaf community. However, a new challenge faces the Deaf community now, with so many non-native signing interpreters coming to the community who have little or no relationship with deaf people, as described previously. The majority of signed language interpreters today undertake courses of study in signed language and in interpreting at colleges and universities and are not 'raised' by, or drawn from, the Deaf community. The gate-keeping role the Deaf community once played is not available in the way it once was (Lee 2010). However, deaf people can still conduct informal screening of interpreting programme graduates upon entry to the workforce, and if found wanting, poorly skilled practitioners can be excluded from practice. Deaf people simply do not request their services or they decline to work with a deficient interpreter, sending a clear signal to interpreting service agencies that this interpreter is not fit for purpose.

The move towards professionalization of signed language interpreters is occurring at a rapid speed today. The impact of legislation and social change has shifted the landscape, and the increased opportunities for deaf people have changed the nature of the profession. It has been suggested, however, that with such rapid growth and change, the signed language interpreting field has entered a state of market disorder (Witter-Merithew and Johnson 2004). Demand is outstripping supply so fast that it is leading to inappropriate practice in the field, such as inadequately skilled practitioners gaining regular employment, often interpreting for deaf children in schools. Because of the erosion of hard-fought standards and the lack of a solid foundation as a profession, the field does not have the necessary 'teeth' to censure poor practice, to control admission to the profession, or to dictate employment standards, and for this reason there is a risk of being relegated to the status of a semi-profession (Bontempo 2013). The profession has not been able to keep pace with this upwards trajectory of growth. Monikowski (2013) argues there is little likelihood of this situation improving until more is expected in terms of education standards for practitioners and minimum scholarly requirements of interpreter educators.

## Current context

### *Education and training issues*

The picture regarding the education and training of signed language interpreters varies considerably around the world, from no training being available at all in some countries, to *ad hoc* short courses of a matter of weeks, to college-level courses of 1–2 years duration in some nations, to full-time undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in universities in several countries (Napier 2009). In addition to the variability in training opportunities, not all countries have standard requirements for practice, certification bodies, or professional associations for signed language interpreters. In many countries the working conditions are not regulated, and signed language interpreters might work in exchange for a meal or travel reimbursement, while other countries have highly regulated sectors. Specified agreements may be in place in some countries addressing duration of assignment, pay scales, occupational health and safety guidelines, codes of ethics, and even regulations around team interpreting, such as working in pairs at long or complex jobs, and alternating between primary and support roles during the assignment to ensure interpreter fatigue does not cause message decay.

Thus, the professionalization of the field is highly variable and in a state of flux around the world. Joint projects between the WFD and the WASLI have led to an increase in interpreter training opportunities and the development of assessment protocols in a number of developing countries in recent years, and such collaborations have had a positive impact on all countries and individuals involved.

Such developments are important in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCHRPD), whereby the right for deaf people to access professional quality signed language interpreting services has been enshrined in international policy and ratified by the governments of many countries. The progress and professionalization of the signed language interpreting field can only be driven by education, training and research. Therefore, to achieve the goal of the UNCHRPD, opportunities for WFD and WASLI to influence teaching and learning programs for interpreters in developing countries are critical, as is the importance of access to quality education programs and adherence to professional standards in developed countries.

Significant change has occurred in recent years as the profession has moved from primarily a community-based interpreting industry with little academic foundation, to one that is increasingly embracing higher standards in training, as well as a search for knowledge, research, and information to support interpreting practice and pedagogy. Empirical research is being increasingly embraced in the field, and the infusion of evidence-based research findings into pedagogical practice is on the increase. This is quite a change from early approaches to teaching signed language interpreters, which was based largely on the intuition and experience of expert interpreters, in the absence of research findings specific to signed language interpreting pedagogy and practice.

## *Research developments*

A growing body of scholarly research into signed language interpreting is being fed into interpreter education programs today. Indeed, the contribution made by signed language interpreting scholars in the past 20–25 years has been significant despite the relative youth of the field. A number of scholars are leading the research drive internationally in many ways, conducting ground-breaking work. Signed language interpreter researchers today have much to offer the spoken language interpreting sector, given that much of the signed language interpreting research that has been conducted in the field has been written for a broader translation and interpreting readership. Many signed language interpreting researchers are exploring the work of spoken language interpreting scholars and finding parallels, replicating studies previously conducted with spoken language interpreting students, and devising collaborative international studies which allow the two fields to intersect on common issues, such as interpreter programme admission testing and disposition for interpreting (Shaw and Hughes 2006; Shaw, Grbic and Franklin 2004; Bontempo *et al.* 2014).

Roy's (1992, 1996, 2000) seminal work on signed language interpreted discourse and Metzger's (1999) foray into analysing the role of the signed language interpreter in interactive discourse, turn taking management and the dynamics of an interpreted event were critical contributions to the field. Napier has been a prolific scholar in the field over the past 15 years and is arguably the leading signed language researcher in the world at present. Her doctoral work on conscious strategic omissions and a new taxonomy for analysing interpretations was published as a book (2002a); she collaborated with colleagues in the production of a textbook that is now used in several interpreting programs around the world (Napier *et al.* 2010); and she has published extensively in prestigious, peer-reviewed academic publications about signed language interpreter

pedagogy and practice (2002b, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011, and many more). A recent collaboration with a spoken language interpreting scholar has led to the publication of a volume regarding research methods in interpreting studies (Hale and Napier 2013).

Winston has led the way with her work on educational interpreting (2004), producing the first edited volume of research on educational interpreting, which exposed the practice as flawed. Winston has also been a leading scholar in developing the domains and competencies necessary for teaching signed language interpreters and developing curricula for this purpose (2005). She has also conducted research into mentoring and teaching discourse (Winston and Monikowski 2000), as well as source text selection for assessment purposes (Winston and Swabey 2011). Russell's (2002, 2005) work on consecutive interpreting and its application in the signed language interpreting sector, and on legal interpreting, has also been instrumental to the development of the systemic knowledge of the field. Sign linguistics scholar Leeson's (2011, 2012) publications apply a sociolinguistics lens to interpreting, and the contributions of Stone (2014 (with Vinson), 2013, 2010) have further added recent insight and depth to our knowledge and understanding of interpreting. These authors have many more publications than those cited, and indeed many more academics not singled out here have contributed significantly to our understanding of the process and practice of signed language interpreting in recent years, with reviews of the full range and depth of research in the field and its impact outlined by Napier (2013) and Grbic (2007).

Germane to the issue of scholarly activity in signed language interpreting is that there has also been a groundswell of research initiated by intellectually curious interpreting practitioners who are not full-time academics as such. Essentially they have an interest in a topic or an area of concern informed by their own practice as interpreters, which draws them into conducting and publishing research (Napier 2011). A term for this phenomenon was coined by Gile (1994) when it first occurred among spoken language interpreters. He described practitioner-researchers as 'practi-searchers'. Given the relatively low number of academics in full-time positions at universities who are involved in signed language interpreting research around the world, the contribution of practisearchers has been critical and must be acknowledged.

## *Issues and challenges*

The gains made in many countries in education and training practices, and the burgeoning research culture in signed language interpreting have led to a greater understanding of the gaps in the field and an awareness of challenges and concerns related to current practices. One such concern, unique to signed language interpreters, is the risk of occupational overuse injury due to the nature of bimodal interpreting, in which significant cognitive and physical resources are invested. Interpreters receive a message in the source language in one modality, comprehend that message, process and analyse it with a view to finding a semantic equivalent in the target language, reformulate the message into the target language while ensuring linguistic and cultural norms are incorporated, and then produce the target text in a different modality. Signed language interpreters frequently work simultaneously rather than consecutively, so whilst producing the target utterance in one mode, interpreters are continuing to receive and process the next message from the source language in a different mode, monitoring and repairing the last target utterance as needed, and consciously making coherent links to the next utterance yet to be conveyed (see Chapter 5 on simultaneous interpreting). The physical process of producing signs creates a biomechanical load and muscle tension that can lead to injury. Research by Madden (2005) suggests signed language interpreters are particularly prone to occupational overuse injury due to the likelihood of repetitive strain of the wrists, arms, neck, and shoulders, whilst under pressure to process and represent someone else's words. The task demands more than just 'talking' in a signed language,

so such injuries are not necessarily experienced at higher rates by deaf people; it appears to be the task of interpreting for someone else that adds a layer of tension to the process and increases the risk of occupational injury in sign language interpreters.

In addition to cognitive and physical stress, there can be a challenge in maintaining an appropriate 'professional distance' in the signed language interpreting field. Many signed language users access interpreting services on a cradle to grave basis (Napier *et al.* 2010) and the Deaf community is not large in some cities and towns, so interpreters often know many of their clients. Interpreters are human beings, and are not neutral conduits or 'black boxes' capable of mechanistically conveying information; nor would one want them to be, as that suggests they bring nothing to the interaction in terms of skills, knowledge, abilities, and experience, all of which help to facilitate communication rather than hinder it. Interpreters make professional decisions about the interpreted event, and choices about their interpretation are informed by these subjective and objective judgements and the extent and range of the interpreters' personal and professional experience. Boundary management can become blurred, particularly when the client is known to the interpreter, or the topic is sensitive (see Chapter 20 on ethics and the role of the interpreter). The parties directly involved in the interaction may amend and adjust their communication to suit the presence of an interpreter; indeed, research suggests the participants are directly influenced by the involvement of an interpreter, and vice versa, and that all parties including the interpreter work towards a joint construction of meaning during an interaction (Wilcox and Schaffer 2005). This can leave interpreters open to experiencing vicarious traumatization as a result of the work they do, and is an issue gaining attention in the field out of concern for interpreter well-being. The risk of compassion fatigue is considered high for signed language interpreters who sometimes know clients due to the nature of the Deaf community, but also as they physically create sometimes graphic signs and 'readback' visual scenes, potentially triggering mirror neuron and empathy responses (Bontempo and Malcolm 2012; see Chapter 21 regarding vicarious trauma).

A further challenge for signed language interpreters is that the Deaf community is not a homogeneous group. Deaf people may be native signers from birth, having been born into a signing deaf family, or they may have learned a signed language much later in life, which affects fluency. Some deaf people have residual hearing and speech skills and others do not. More than 90% of deaf people are born into hearing families (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004), and many of these deaf people do not have good communication with members of their family of origin as no one in their family has learned to sign. These diverse backgrounds and factors that impact on language acquisition and linguistic proficiency mean that Deaf community members can be highly variable in their use of signed language. Signed language interpreters have to adapt to this range of linguistic proficiency and accommodate sometimes significant differences and multi-level skills in their interpretations and interactions with deaf people. Sociolinguistic variation is rife in many national signed languages due to settlement patterns, influence from external signed languages, and educational experiences, among other factors. This high degree of variation is further exacerbated by the fact that in most countries there are no resources which would typically help shape the standardization of a language, for example, dictionaries, language planning and policies, television presentation of the 'standard form' of the language, and so on (Johnston 2003). This leads to issues for interpreters with regard to quality service provision, but also presents concerns for interpreter educators in relation to teaching approaches, and in assessing interpreter performance.

In relation to providing quality interpreting services, in some places in the world, such as in the Scandinavian region, the UK, the USA, Australia, and some European countries, the education and employment situation for deaf people has shifted and the introduction of equal opportunity

legislation and human rights legislation has led to increased opportunity, creating a growing group of deaf professionals. The needs of these deaf professionals, who may be lawyers, neurologists, teachers, medical practitioners, CEOs, members of parliament, etc., has led to a change in the interpreting field too, with interpreters having to work increasingly from the signed language of a technical expert into a spoken language, with specialized terminology and in a specific register, or in diplomatic or corporate environments – echelons previously the domain of spoken language interpreters only.

This increase in deaf professionals has also seen the rise of the 'designated interpreter paradigm'. Because some deaf professionals work in highly specialized disciplines, such as medicine or law for example, as the professional giving advice or counsel, or engaging with peers for networking purposes, professional development activities, or performance management, it has become increasingly important for interpreters to share in the knowledge and terminology of the sector that the deaf professional is involved in. This has led to the practice of deaf professionals selecting interpreters from a very small pool of sometimes only one or two, and rarely more than four, interpreters with whom they are willing to work when engaged in their professional work (Bontempo *et al.* 2014). They feel confident in the capacity and skill of their selected interpreters, resulting in the 'designated interpreter' concept (Hauser, Finch and Hauser 2008).

### *Current practices and settings*

It has been noted there has been an increase in diplomatic interpreting opportunities for signed language interpreters, as the Deaf community increasingly accesses society on an equal footing with hearing people, and as deaf professionals engage with more opportunities to network and to learn. However, the reality is that most signed language interpreters work in community settings (see Chapters 12–17 for further discussion of these areas of work). A growing area of work in recent years has been broadcast interpreting (television news, emergency announcements during natural disasters, signed translations for websites, and so on), and performance interpreting in the theatre. The range of situations in which signed language interpreters can find themselves assigned to is very diverse, due to the cradle to grave nature of signed language interpreting with deaf people, and can require highly specialized skills in some cases. Specialized skills are necessary when working with a deafblind person, when engaging in theatre interpreting, or when working as part of a team with a deaf interpreter (for example, as the hearing interpreter providing a 'feed' from English into BSL to a deaf person working on stage, who then interprets from the BSL relay into International Sign at a conference).

As well as the many professional contexts they may work in, signed language interpreters can find themselves in quite intimate interactions at times, since interpreters are required across the lifespan and in diverse aspects of daily life. It is not uncommon for deaf people to be unable to communicate effectively with their hearing family members, for example, which means that signed language interpreters are often booked to interpret at family gatherings and personal special celebrations, such as 21st birthdays, christenings, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, and so on.

## Trends and recommendations

In the signed language interpreting field today, demand currently outstrips supply. Agencies, consumers, and interpreters are all seeking ways to work more productively, fulfilling the service need in the community. One of the responses to this in recent years has been the development of video relay services (VRS) and video remote interpreting (VRI) services, which allow deaf and hearing people to connect via visual technology equipment, much like telephone interpreting for

spoken language interpreting clients (see Chapter 22 on remote interpreting). VRS is intended to replace old telecommunications technology for deaf people, such as telephone typewriter relay services, and allows deaf people to now make phone calls to colleagues, friends, family, and business in signed language via an interpreter instead of having to type out their message and have it read aloud by a relay operator and typed back to them. Instead, the phone call is interpreted by a remote interpreter. Differing from VRS, VRI is an interpreted interaction whereby the deaf person and the hearing professional are at one site (for example, an admitting triage nurse and a deaf patient in the emergency room of a hospital) and the interpreter is at a separate location and the parties can communicate via technology. VRI is intended for specific types of appointments that do not require a high level of turn taking, are short in duration, are relatively low risk, and are useful as a temporary measure until an interpreter can reach the site (Lightfoot 2006). In the aforementioned example, a VRI service might be viable upon patient presentation at the emergency room, until an interpreter can get to the hospital to provide a face to face interpreting service.

VRI has become increasingly commonplace in the US, impacting on the work practices of signed language interpreters. In addition, huge call centres have been built to house VRS interpreters, who work in shifts 24 hours a day to meet the telecommunications access needs of the Deaf community. The concern has been that these services will take face to face interpreting services away from the community (Dion 2005), offering guaranteed shifts, annual leave, sick leave, and so on – benefits not typically available to a freelance signed language interpreter. This has altered the workforce and changed work patterns for signed language interpreters. Moreover, it brings linguistic, social, and physical challenges to the VRS and VRI work setting for interpreters, who have since been found to experience higher levels of stress (Dean, Pollard and Samar 2011) compared to interpreters working face to face in education and community settings. The benefits of having an 'instant interpreter' in many cases outweigh a lot of the identified concerns with VRS and VRI work, however, and similar services are being, or have been, established in many more countries now, including the UK (McWhinney 2009) and Australia (Napier *et al.* 2010). The lessons learned from the US experience should be taken into account in establishing VRS and VRI services in other countries.

The increased opportunities presented by technology, the speed and ease of travel in a shrinking world, and the more frequent gathering of deaf people to conduct business at high levels, such as at the United Nations (where the WFD is represented) and at international conferences, have led to the increased use of a sign pidgin commonly known as International Sign (IS). Not based on any single signed language (although influenced by ASL), the use of this pidgin allows deaf people from different nations to be able to communicate reasonably effectively without reverting to a national signed language, if none is shared amongst the participants present. The high profile events where IS is used, such as the Deaflympics, the International Conference of Educators of the Deaf, the WFD Congress, the WASLI Conference, and so on, have resulted in signed language interpreters viewing this IS work as the pinnacle of the profession. To be an effective IS interpreter, one must be fluent in a number of languages (spoken and signed), generally be a native signer (hearing or deaf), well-educated, and an extremely experienced interpreter. This trend towards using IS in international fora has been largely well received by the Deaf community and interpreters, but there are no standards for selecting IS interpreters to work at this level, no assessment criteria for determining proficiency in IS, and no way at present to formally train and certify signed language interpreters wanting to reach this level of practice. No large-scale empirical studies regarding the comprehensibility of IS have been conducted, either. At the moment, IS interpreters tend to be selected by the deaf professionals concerned who are participating in these high-level interactions at the United Nations and so on, harking back to the gate-keeping role referred to earlier in this chapter. For now, this appears to be

working for the most part, but it may not last for long, and more formalized processes and practices are likely to be called for in the not too distant future. There will also be a demand for empirical research on IS, of which little has been published to date.

International signed language interpreter educator associations have also sprung up. The Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) in the US has a long history, while the Interpreter Trainers Network (ITN) in Australia is a much younger association. Both have a combined international membership of well over 500 signed language interpreter educators, trainers, and mentors and reach into many countries. The training arm of EFSLI (European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters) also extends to many countries in Europe. The smaller scale of the signed language interpreting field makes it easier to develop formal and informal signed language interpreter education networks and to exchange information, knowledge, skills, and resources trans-nationally than it perhaps is for spoken language interpreter educators. Such collaborations have allowed greater standardization and sharing of information regarding certification and accreditation systems, curricula, lesson plans, and the development of repositories of training materials – of considerable benefit to novice educators, trainers, and mentors. The establishment of WASLI has added further cohesion to the scene on an international level. This association is able to provide support to developing countries in particular by liaising with and obtaining resources from more developed nations.

A trend in the US yet to be taken up to the same extent in other countries, but of considerable merit for signed language interpreters, is the notion of service learning (Shaw 2012; Monikowski and Peterson 2005), whereby classroom instruction is combined with community service projects within the Deaf community and students have to contribute in a meaningful way to the local community. Given the increased social distance between Deaf communities and interpreters due to interpreters being less frequently drawn from the community and more often entering the profession via education programs, embedding formal service learning projects in interpreter education programs has been one response to the efforts to re-centre interpreting practice in the Deaf community and is a recommended practice for programs outside the US too.

## Future directions

The future holds exciting possibilities for signed language interpreters. As technology continues to advance, it is likely that the playing field for signed language interpreters will change. Computer technology and new applications for smart phones, iPads, and tablets are being developed to make interpreter bookings and to conduct short interpreted exchanges until a face to face service is available.

The skills and unique qualities deaf people themselves bring to the role of interpreter are increasingly being recognized, and opportunities for deaf interpreters to gain accreditation and qualifications and to access suitable training and education opportunities are also on the rise. In 2013, deaf interpreters in Australia were granted recognition by NAATI (the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) for the first time (Bontempo *et al.* 2014). This marked the first time in the world that a translating and interpreting body for all languages (not just signed language interpreters) had acknowledged the specialized work of deaf interpreters in working between different signed languages, or in signed language translation work (of written materials or of scripted broadcast-type work), and in work with deaf people using non-conventional signed languages. It signalled a great step forward internationally for deaf interpreters. Until NAATI recognition in Australia, deaf interpreters had only ever been credentialed by deaf-specific interpreting accreditation bodies, such as the Registry of

Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the US and Signature in the UK. Also in Australia, NAATI are presently considering a conference interpreter level of accreditation for signed language interpreters – an elite level of certification not available previously to signed language interpreters, even though they may have been practising at this level. This also opens the door for signed language interpreters to more readily be afforded equal status on the international stage with spoken language conference interpreters.

The tide has turned for signed language interpreters. They are much more likely to be viewed as professionals today, rather than a relative or friend of the deaf person, and the field has matured considerably. However, there remains a need for ongoing professionalization and standardization, and considerable opportunities for development still exist in a number of countries whose interpreters continue to hold 'fledgling' or 'emerging' status and are not quite as far along the continuum as others. Even in more well-established countries there is work to be done to ensure that signed language interpreting is not seen as a semi-professionand to continue to professionalize our practice, our scholarly pursuits, and our pedagogy.

Signed language interpreting is undoubtedly an area of rapid evolution and growth. Not only is the demand for quality interpreting services outstripping the available supply of interpreters in many countries around the world, it is a field that has seen rapid change in a relatively short period of time. We have achieved increased acceptance in the academy and the number of doctoral candidates and leaders and scholars in the field is on the rise, albeit slowly. A burgeoning culture of research, larger steps towards the professionalization of the field, greater numbers of higher education institutions delivering interpreter education programs, and the increased expectations of the Deaf community and other service users have led to remarkable transformations within the signed language interpreting sector in recent years. Whilst there is considerable work yet to do in various parts of the world, technological advancements have opened up the marketplace in many ways to new forms of interpreting, and have made the world smaller in terms of accessing professional development and online resources for interpreter networking. Greater alignment with the spoken language interpreting sector on common issues, and increasing global opportunities for cooperation, all help interpreters to share information and knowledge, moving the field forward together.

## Further reading

Dean, Robyn K. and Pollard, Robert Q. (2013). *The demand control schema: Interpreting as a practice profession*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

A textbook on the application of demand control schema to the signed language interpreting profession. Provides detailed information on the DC-S framework for effective decision making, and on the observation-supervision of signed language interpreters.

Grbic, Nadja. (2007). Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? A bibliometrical analysis of writings and research on sign language interpreting. *The Sign Language Translator and Interpreter (SLTI)*: Volume 1, Number 1: 15–51

A good overview of the 908 publications on signed language interpreting research between 1970 and 2005.

Marschark, Marc, Peterson, Rico and Winston, Elizabeth A. (eds). (2005). *Sign language interpreting and interpreter education: directions for research and practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A particularly useful volume, raising some thought-provoking issues. A diverse group of scholars in the field contribute to this volume, addressing issues of signed language interpreting history, education, research and practice in a number of countries.

Napier, Jemina. (Ed). (2009). *International perspectives on sign language interpreter education*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press.

An excellent volume drawing together information on the signed language interpreter education, training and mentoring context of a large number of countries.

Napier, Jemina, McKee, Rachel, and Goswell, Della. (2010). *Sign language interpreting: Theory and practice in Australia and New Zealand* (2nd ed.). Sydney: The Federation Press.

Although written for an Australian and New Zealand readership, this textbook has much to offer signed language interpreting students and practitioners irrespective of specific language combinations.

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