



A Band-Aid on a gunshot wound?

Sign language interpreting and the illusion of inclusion

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Institutionalized sign language interpreting services, 2019

- Have existed for more than four decades
- Game-changer for deaf communities
- Well-established **social institutions** and professional services
- Have funding, research, power and legal mandates
- **Interact on a systemic level** with other social institutions like education systems and public services

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Marko Vallius; Flickr

- Global claims
- Individual SL interpreters
- Countries where SLIS are *institutionalized*
- SLI as social and political *system*
- Based on De Meulder & Hauland (2019) in Translation & Interpreting Studies: SLI as 'quick fix'?



SLI services in legislation

- 2003 BSL recognition: £1M for SLI provision and training – none for services in BSL (Turner 2003)
- Finland debate for SL Act (2016): Ministry of Justice declared that “there have to be interpreters so that persons using sign language can communicate with the authorities” (De Meulder 2016)
- Malta SL law cannot be implemented before first cohort of SLI graduates in 2020 (Azzopardi-Alexander et al. 2019)



Some observations about 'access'

- Most SL legislation presupposes there are SLI or they will have to be made available
- Dominant institutional discourse:
 - 'Access' for deaf people = availability of SLI
 - Lack of access => increase number of SLI
- Meaning of language rights for deaf people often understood as right to communicate via SLI
- 'Access' to a majority/spoken language



Citizens for Accessible Neighbourhoods (CAN)

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Provision of SLIS has become an institutionally normative, often unquestioned, solution to provide access and inclusion for deaf people

We problematize SLIS as replacing or concealing the need for language-concordant education and public services




"Brainstorm" appears courtesy of [Joe Sparano] from The Noun Project.

Educational settings

- Few spoken language interpreters work in schools
- Schools common workplace for novice interpreters
- Ideology of 'inclusion'
- Lack of opportunities for deaf people to become teachers
- SLIS complicity in dismantling of congregated education systems?

Health care settings

- Communication challenges even when interpreters present
- Interpreters essential solution but imperfect one
- Need for language-concordant services



Sign language interpreters: the illusion of inclusion?

- Not just in education (Russell 2007) but also in other settings
- Lack of control and feelings of frustration with interpreting process, both among deaf people, professional service providers and interpreters
- Naïve belief in what SLI can achieve
- Continuous challenge related to quality of SLI

Contextual language and modality choices

- Cultural differences apart, deaf people do not work with interpreters *all the time*
- They make contextual language and modality choices based on context and interlocutors
- Institutional flattening of deaf people's language practices?



Sign language interpreting creating inequality



- Right to access more often guaranteed for those with certain interpreter-related privileges
 - Multilingual & multimodal competencies
 - Educational and professional experience & network(s)
- Exact opposite of what SLIS aim to achieve

Developing language-concordant services



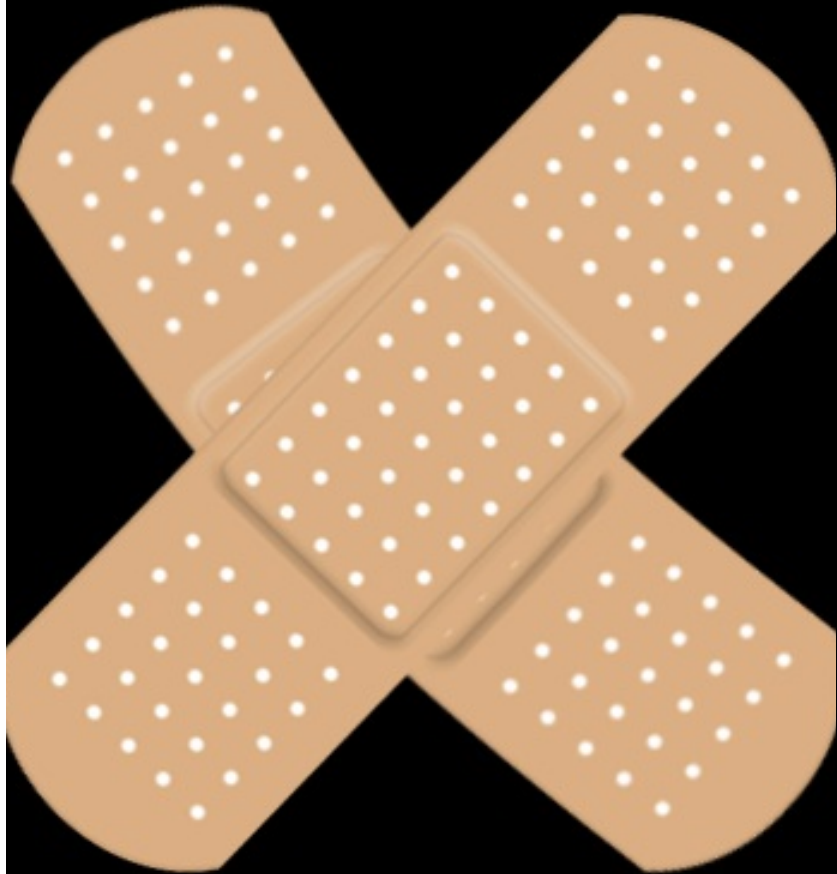
Documented association between language-concordant services and better healthcare outcomes (Fernandez et al. 2010, Ngo-Metzger et al. 2007, Schenker et al. 2010)



Relieving the burden of consistently being interpreted (Young, Oram, and Napier 2019)



Recognising diverse communication strategies/languageing and contextual language choices



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- SLIS are and should stay a crucial part of creating an inclusive society
 - But like any social institution they should be studied and analyzed critically
 - This includes
 - more scrutiny about how different kinds of 'accesses' can be implemented, both with and without SLIS
 - More awareness of contextual language choices deaf people make, beyond the use of interpreters



**Now
what?**

- Understand the system mechanisms in the SLI profession
- Responsibilities of sign language interpreters as a professional group?
- Implications for research, training and advocacy?

Possible special issue with
*Translation and Interpreting
Studies* (ed. Hauvaland, De
Meulder and Napier)
- get in touch if you want to
contribute!

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