



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 (forthcoming 2019) in Translation & Interpreting Studies: SLI as 'quick fix'?

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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)

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



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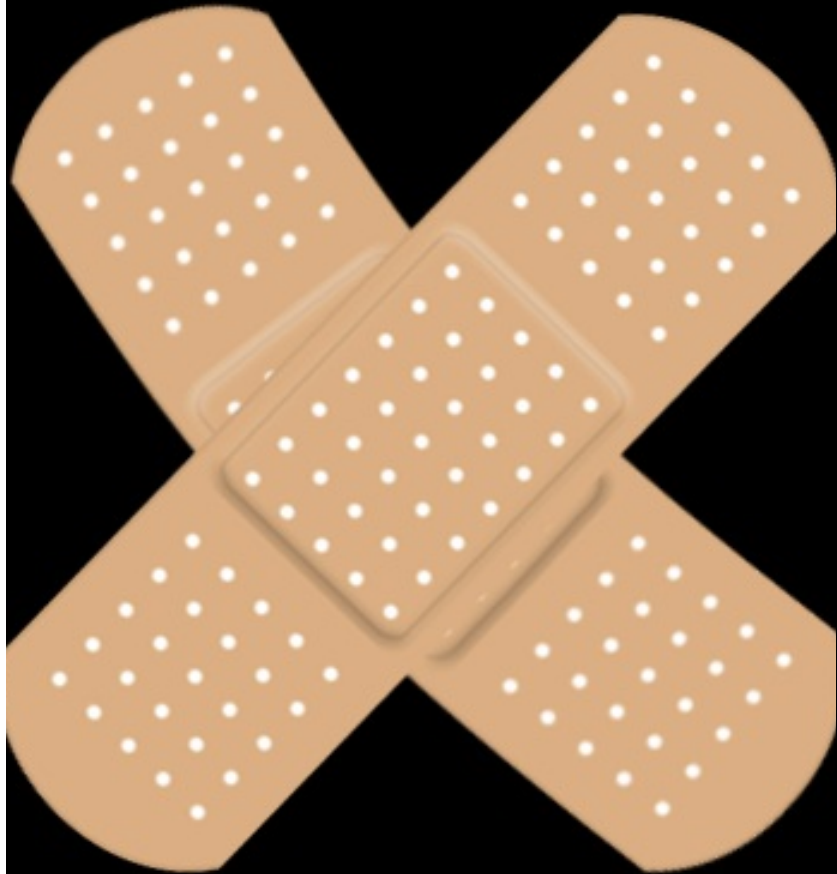
Documented association between language-concordant services and better healthcare outcomes (Fernandez et al. 2010, Ngo-Metzger et al. 2007, Schenker et al. 2010)



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?**

- Discuss and broaden the discussions on what “accessibility” means
- National associations of the deaf; advocate for more language-concordant services, not only interpreters
- Implications for research, politics and advocacy?

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

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