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From Gestuno Interpreting to International Sign Interpreting: Improved Accessibility?

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements I want to express my gratitude for all of the experiences and learning that I have acquired during these past WFD congresses. A special thanks goes to all the NAD-interpreter colleagues that I have worked with over the years, as well as the IS-interpreters working alongside us. What I am questioning here is not something they have caused, on the contrary, they have frequently helped us NAD-interpreters in various ways. Thank you also to Guri Amundsen and Torill Ringsø for valuable comments on earlier versions of this text.

Erratum

At the request of the author, this article was republished on November 27, 2020 with minor changes.

From Gestuno Interpreting to International Sign Interpreting: Improved Accessibility?

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Editors' Note: This article is presented as a practitioner's essay on innovative practices in interpreting. At the request of the author, this article was republished on November 27, 2020 with minor changes.

ABSTRACT

In order to shape the future of our profession, I believe it is necessary for us to also take a critical look at both past and present practices. With that goal in mind, this commentary presents a case study of the sign language interpreting services provided at the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Congresses held between 1983 and 2019. During the 1980s and 1990s we witnessed both the professionalization of signed language interpreting at international conferences, and improved accessibility for official delegates of various National Associations of the Deaf (NADs) as well as for other participants. Increasing numbers of interpreters worked at the congresses. Additionally, measures were gradually taken to provide all working interpreters with adequate preparation materials, quiet rooms to prepare in, meetings with presenters, easy and quick access to food in breaks, etc. Gradually, however, we have seen a decline in the numbers of NAD-interpreters working into/from their national signed languages at WFD congresses. The so called Gestuno-interpreting has been replaced with International Sign-interpreting (IS-interpreting). This has gradually also led to increased focus on providing specialized IS-interpreters, and also on providing services for them. It is now time for us to step back and take a look at the changes we have seen. Are we convinced that the development we have seen is for the best? Will the increasing use of IS-interpreting at a number of international conferences and meetings ensure deaf people around the globe equal accessibility in a broader sense? Will this focus on interpreting into/from something other than national signed language ensure that the linguistic rights of deaf people are being preserved? Is this what is best for the interpreting profession in the long run?

INTRODUCTION

The theme for the 2019 conference of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) was "Honoring the past, treasuring the present, shaping the future". In order to shape the future of our profession, I believe it is necessary for us to also take a critical look at both past and present practices. With that goal in mind, this historical commentary piece presents a case study of the sign language interpreting services provided at the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Congresses held between 1983 and 2019. As one of the interpreters for the Swedish delegation

during eight of the nine last congresses, I have experienced firsthand the changes that have taken place over the years.

With this text I want to provide a description that can form the basis for reflection and discussion regarding whether the developments described here, are truly for the best. Has the increased focus on IS-interpreting ensured that all deaf participants from around the globe have equal (or at least increased) access, in a broader sense? Is the focus on IS-interpreting, rather than interpreting into/from a national signed language, what is best for the profession? This description is from a Swedish perspective, but the changes have affected deaf participants (and their interpreters) from many countries around the world.

Before moving on, let me make it clear that the focus here is presentations being interpreted into or from a national signed language. Whether participants and presenters at WFD congresses want to, or should be encouraged to, present directly in International Sign is a completely different matter.¹

THE EARLY YEARS

During the 1980s and the 1990s, official delegates to a WFD congress would bring their own interpreters, who interpreted between their national signed languages and spoken English. In those days, a fairly large number of "grassroots" deaf people also attended the WFD congresses, or just visited the city where it was held, as tourists. Interpreters from different countries would interpret for representatives of their respective National Association of the Deaf (NAD), but they would also interpret for other participants from their country – both at the congress and in other locations like hotels and tour agents' offices. In the following, such interpreters will be referred to as NAD-interpreters.

Countries that could afford to, would bring several NAD-interpreters, who would then be assigned to cover parallel sessions. Information was posted for each day regarding where interpreting into/from different signed languages was available. Deaf participants from the Nordic countries would coordinate where their interpreters were, in order to maximize the number of sessions where interpreting was available into/from at least one of the Nordic signed languages.

In short, what we witnessed during these early years, was both the professionalization of signed language interpreting at international conferences, and improved accessibility for the official delegates of various National Associations of the Deaf as well as for other participants.

THE IX WFD CONGRESS – PALERMO 1983

During the IX WFD Congress in Palermo, Italy, in 1983, the official signed languages were Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Gestuno.² Spoken languages were used for a large number of the presentations, as they were held by hearing "experts". The Gestuno-interpreting that was provided

¹ Interpreting between different spoken languages during these congresses will not be discussed either.

² A short introduction to Gestuno can be found here: <http://brett-zamir.me/gestuno/> (Accessed 20 June, 2020.)

was more or less incomprehensible for many of the participants. However, participants from several countries around the world had brought their own interpreters.

As one of the NAD-interpreters during the Palermo congress, I know that we did not get any preparation materials – with the exception of the printed program that we received on arrival. The organizers had not really planned for other interpreters than the ones they had provided themselves. There was no interpreter coordinator, no room for interpreters to prepare in, nor any of the other services for interpreters that were to come. On a more positive note, this was not only the first time the Swedish interpreters were paid to interpret, but also the first time they did not have to pay for travel, food and hotel themselves.

THE X WFD CONGRESS – ESPOO 1987

As of the WFD Congress in Espoo, Finland, in 1987, Gestuno-interpreting was replaced with interpreting into/from International Sign (IS).³ During these early days of the provision of specialized IS-interpreters as an alternative to training Gestuno-interpreters, teams of IS-interpreters were put together carefully. Efforts were made to include interpreters from many continents, and teams consisted of both hearing and deaf interpreters. To provide access to as many deaf participants as possible, varied teams were put together, aiming to make their signed target language output as "international" as possible.

In addition to these IS-interpreters, an even larger number of countries than in 1983 brought their own NAD-interpreters. According to Bill Moody, who was one of the IS-interpreters in 1987, the delegations from 26 of the 51 attending countries brought at least one interpreter of their own (Moody, 2002).

All interpreters working at the congress were treated equally and had the same access to everything. All interpreters were introduced to each other at the first interpreter meeting, also the spoken language interpreters. Some of the preparation materials were faxed to us beforehand, and more printed materials were available in a room intended for interpreters (and shared by all interpreters). For the first time, there was an interpreting coordinator. Drinks and food were easily accessible, and the interpreters were even offered free massage by a deaf masseur once or twice during the congress.

At the time, it was made clear that provision of IS-interpreting was not the aim, but something that was offered for those who could not afford to bring NAD-interpreters. The then board member of the WFD, Asger Bergmann, stated that:

"WFD provides international interpreters for those countries that cannot afford their own interpreters. Provision is not perfect, but it is important to emphasize that it is an emergency solution, which does not give satisfactory benefit. If deaf

³ A short introduction to International Sign can be found here: <https://wasli.org/international-sign-definition> (Accessed 20 June, 2020.)

people get 50% benefit from lectures, it is better than no access to information.”
(Bergmann, 1990, as cited in Rosenstock, 2016, p. 99)

The PEAK: THE XI, XII & XIII WFD CONGRESSES: TOKYO 1991, VIENNA 1995 & BRISBANE 1999

During the following three WFD Congresses, the improved provision of sign language interpreting and services for these interpreters were consolidated. The organizers provided IS-interpreter teams that were very similar to the ones that had been provided in Finland. In addition, there was a gradual increase in the number of NAD-interpreters working. Building on the experiences from 1987, measures were also taken to provide all working interpreters with adequate preparation materials and a quiet room to prepare in. Meetings continued to be arranged with all presenters, so that interpreters could clarify particular concepts that presenters were using and also get acquainted with their accents. All interpreters were ensured easy and quick access to food during breaks, so time could be spent preparing to interpret the next presentations instead of standing in line.

Arrangements were also made to make space on, or near, the platform/stage for those interpreters working into/from the signed languages of the largest delegations of deaf participants. These spaces were often marked with signs with the name of the country or with a flag. Additional spaces were marked along the sides of rooms, in aisles, and other places, to make it easy for participants to know where they should sit to have a good view of both the speaker and the NAD-interpreter they wanted to see. There were also routines to make sure that lighting remained sufficient for all interpreters to be visible at all times. Figure 1 shows the main congress room during the XII WFD congress in Vienna in 1995, where a large number of NAD-interpreters worked (sitting or standing) in different places in the room.



Figure 1. The main conference room in Vienna, 1995, with many NAD-interpreters.⁴

THE DECLINE

Gradually, however, we have seen a decline in the numbers of NAD-interpreters working at WFD congresses, and also in the services provided for them. Instead, there has been an increased focus on providing specialized IS-interpreters. This is a possibility that was discussed by the WFD Commission on Communication already in the 1980s: "As international gesture interpreting became more high profile, would its prestige overpower national sign languages, which, after all, are true languages and more dependable for transmitting full information?" (Moody, 2002, p. 17).

THE XIV & XV WFD CONGRESSES: MONTREAL 2003 & MADRID 2007

The decline began in 2003, and several colleagues have stories to tell of how they (as NAD-interpreters) have gradually been made to feel inferior to IS-interpreters. One example is from the first interpreter meeting during the congress in Montreal, Canada, in 2003. First, all of the IS-interpreters, and the national interpreters (working into/from ASL and LSQ) were introduced by name. Then, the person in charge of the meeting said there was no time to introduce all of the NAD-interpreters. One of the IS-interpreters, Liz Scott Gibson from the UK, put a stop to this by demanding to know whom she was going to be working with.⁵ During the same meeting, we were also (literally) told, that if we practiced a lot, one day we might also be good enough to work as IS-interpreters.⁶

Being able to prepare to interpret at these congresses has also become increasingly difficult for NAD-interpreters. When it comes to accessing preparation materials, in Madrid, Spain, in 2007, e.g., the Norwegian interpreters were denied printed preparation materials (that were available to the IS-interpreters) even when they offered to pay for having them printed.⁷

Even more problems were now created by how preparation meetings with speakers were organized. Previously, there had been one single meeting where all those presenting on a particular day, or during a particular session, would take turns to reply to questions etc. from all interpreters. Increasingly, meetings were scheduled to make sure the IS-interpreters (and sometimes NAD-interpreters from the hosting country) could meet the person(s) whose presentations they would be interpreting. Several parallel meetings were held, and nobody could attend all of them. But, NAD-interpreters are usually scheduled to interpret many presentations, and therefore would need to talk to more of the presenters. As this was made impossible, NAD-interpreters could no longer ask questions of and listen to the voices of all the presenters they were going to interpret.

⁴ Photo used with kind permission from the WFD (23 February, 2020).

⁵ Torill Ringsø (p.c. June 2019)

⁶ Pia Wendel (p.c. June 2019)

⁷ Torill Ringsø (p.c. June 2019)

THE XVI & XVII WFD CONGRESSES: DURBAN 2011 & ISTANBUL 2015

As of the congress in Durban, South Africa, 2011, the shift in focus to the provision of IS-interpreters and providing services for them became even more evident. As NAD-interpreters, we were now only allowed to register and pick up our badges and programs if we were accompanied by "our" deaf delegates.

At the start of the congress, NAD-interpreters only had access to their own copy of the abstract book, and two binders with printed paper copies of the presentations – which we had to read in "our" interpreter room. When we first arrived at the congress center, NAD-interpreters and IS-interpreters were actually referred to separate rooms for preparation. This was quickly changed, after a number of remarks about this resembling apartheid. However, the interpreter rooms were located in the conference building, which was far from the hotels and closed in the early evening. This would make it impossible for us to read preparation materials in the evenings and/or early mornings. Again, one of the IS-interpreters solved the problem. This time, it was Christopher Stone from the UK, who invited us all to share a Dropbox where he put the preparation materials that had been made available to them.

Meetings with speakers, however, continued to be scheduled to fit the needs of IS-interpreters– making it impossible for NAD-interpreters to meet all speakers, thereby hampering our possibilities to prepare for our interpreting assignments. No food was provided for NAD-interpreters – not even when we offered to pay for it. To have food delivered, as the IS-interpreters had, would have given us more time to prepare for the afternoon sessions, instead, we had to stand in long lines with other participants.

Despite our feedback, much of what happened in 2011 was repeated in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2015. This time, however, a Dropbox with preparation materials was set up by the organizers themselves, and the same interpreters' room was available for all interpreters working during the conference. But the printed, last minute information regarding the closing session was not delivered to the NAD-interpreters and plans for that session were discussed at a meeting that we were not invited to. We were clearly not expected to attend this meeting, which was also where a note of thanks for the hard work was presented from the President of WFD to the IS-interpreters. The work of NAD-interpreters was not mentioned, and the few of us who happened to have heard of the meeting and attended it, felt quite embarrassed.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: THE XVIII WFD CONGRESS – PARIS 2019

Having provided feedback to organizing committees several times, with little or no resulting changes, it was with mixed feelings I accepted a request to interpret at the most recent WFD Congress, in Paris, France, in 2019. Indeed, not much had changed for the better this time either. Once again, we had to stand in line with all other participants to register, though we were at least allowed to register without having "our" deaf delegates in tow. We also had to stand in line every morning for the headphones that we needed to listen to interpreting from French into English, and also to hand them back every afternoon. The IS-interpreters who needed headphones, had theirs delivered in the interpreter room.

As for food, we were hoping there might finally be a change for the better, as NAD-interpreters were offered to pre-pay lunchboxes. But, again, we had to stand in line with all other participants who had had the same offer. The IS-interpreters had food delivered in the interpreters' room, while they were preparing to interpret the next session.

The routine of providing preparation materials beforehand, via Dropbox, seems to have come to stay. But it took us several rounds of explicitly asking for information about who would be awarded medals etc. during the closing ceremony before we finally received it. It seemed we were not trusted to maintain professional secrecy.

In Paris, we were not even allowed to enter any of the rooms unless a deaf person from our country accompanied us or was already there. This gave us very little time to find a suitable place to sit or stand. And when we were finally inside, finding a good place was also made very difficult for us. Several times, we were told by deaf volunteers that we could not sit up front near the stage – as this would be "visually disturbing". NAD-interpreters were not allowed to sit or stand in the aisles either, as these had to be kept clear in case of an emergency. In general, it was evident, that nobody had given any thought to the presence of other interpreters than the IS-interpreters and those from the host country. Several times the room was left in complete darkness when presentations started, making all interpreters except those on the stage completely invisible.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER – AND HOW?

To reinforce what was mentioned in the introduction, I am not questioning the wish for increased communication in International Sign. What I am questioning is the one-eyed focus on interpreting being into/from International Sign, and on providing services for those interpreters. In this section, we will take a closer look at some of the consequences this has led to.

FOCUS ON USING IS RATHER THAN NATIONAL SIGNED LANGUAGES

During the past decades we have seen an increased expectation that everybody should use (one version of) International Sign. However, not all deaf people are confident IS-users. Some participants may be able to watch and understand, but not to express themselves in a nuanced and fluent manner on a specific or theoretical topic. Other participants may lack the IS-skills necessary to even access the gist of some presentations. There have been comments about the "WFD-version of IS", claiming that "only those familiar with the western European or American context can make sense of its limited vocabulary set" (Wrigley, 1996, pp. 114-115). Compared to the IS-interpreting in the 1980s and 1990s, understanding IS-interpreting today does seem to rely more heavily on more advanced levels of English comprehension than earlier. But not all deaf representatives of National Associations of the Deaf have had an opportunity to learn English.

HOW COMPREHENSIBLE IS IS-INTERPRETING?

It is also worth considering what we know about the comprehensibility of IS and of IS-interpreting. Even when describing direct communication (deaf presenter to deaf audience) in IS, and not via interpreters, Rosenstock writes that "...results in Rosenstock (2004) and Whynot (2015) show that overall comprehension [of IS] is far less than lecture comprehension in [native sign languages]..." (Rosenstock, p. 99). And Mara Green noted from the WFD Congress in 2007: "Multiple people

attending the [General Assembly], including delegates, either told me or mentioned in my presence that they could not fully understand IS..." (Green, p. 458). Whynot later also wrote that "... findings from this current work show that IS created by deaf presenters and IS created by interpreters both are understood by a diverse SL-using audience at similar percentages—56% and 54%, respectively." (Rosenstock, 2016, p. 269).

DECREASING NUMBERS OF NAD-INTERPRETERS

With an increasing focus on the provision of IS-interpreting we have also seen a decrease in the number of NAD-interpreters at WFD congresses. This, in turn, means that fewer national signed languages are visible during one of the largest gatherings of organizations of the deaf around the globe. The same is also true for a number of other international deaf related events, and has been noted for example for the Deaf Way conferences:

"It is interesting to note that even in the short 13-year gap between Deaf Way I and Deaf Way II, the number of different SLs present in the interpreting on stage in the opening plenary platforms had significantly reduced from as many as 12 SLs to 3 SLs." (Whynot, 2016, p. 14).

IS-interpreting is clearly no longer regarded as the "emergency solution" that Asger Bergmann wrote about when he was a member of the WFD board (see above). The same has been noted by Rosenstock (2016), who stated that: "The widespread and increasing usage of IS today suggests that it is no longer an emergency solution" (p. 99).

Another consequence of IS-interpreting being offered at increasing numbers of international conferences is that deaf people from Sweden have been denied funding to bring their own (Swedish Sign Language/English) interpreters to international events. Funding has been denied with specific mention of the fact that, according to the conference website, IS-interpreting is provided. Apparently, if IS (also in the form of IS-interpreting) is presented as one of the official languages of a conference, then that should be all that is needed for any deaf person who wishes to attend. The same problem was also noted by Moody, though he writes about an international meeting announcing the provision of "International Sign Language" interpreters in the advance materials, and how this resulted in at least one government refusing to pay for interpreters (Moody, 2002).

FOCUS ON SERVICE FOR IS-INTERPRETERS

With an explicit focus on providing IS-interpreting, providing services for these IS-interpreters has also become a main priority for organizers. As a consequence, as described above, services for NAD-interpreters have suffered. This, in turn, has made it more difficult for the declining numbers of NAD-interpreters working at WFD congresses to prepare – something that is likely to lower the quality of the interpreting services they provide. As a majority of NAD-interpreters are second language users of English, they need increased access to preparation for our assignments, not less.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us again turn to the issue of whether IS-interpreting is an "emergency solution", as it was stated to be in 1990, or what its current status is. In a position paper on International Sign, the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) states that:

"...EUD actively supports access in one's indigenous language (i.e. a national sign language for all Deaf citizens). Providing interpretations in as many national sign languages as possible would be an ideal solution but due to financial and professional restrictions this is not always feasible. However, access in the national sign language (for an audience from one sign language community with a common sign language or a single Deaf person) should always be prioritised and is the only way to provide full and equal access. Therefore, IS is - albeit not being the perfect solution - a good option when working with a diverse audience."⁸

It is, of course, cheaper for organizers to only have to provide interpreters working to/from International Sign than it is to pay for several NAD-interpreter teams at a conference. But, as we have seen, deaf people have actually been denied funding to bring their own NAD-interpreters that would not have had to be paid for by the organizers. Are we seeing imagined cost effectiveness winning, at the price of compromised access – at least for deaf persons who are not skilled users of IS? Norway, for example, sent six NAD-interpreters to the last WFD congress in Paris. Those interpreters did not have the same opportunities to prepare as the IS-interpreters did. How did that affect access for deaf participants from Norway?

Another factor to take into consideration is also providing access for non-privileged deaf people, who have not had the opportunity to learn English. And maybe we should also consider the value of national signed languages being seen and used, and of language rights. According to EUD, access in the national sign language should always be prioritized. They then say that IS-interpreting is not "an ideal solution", but "a good option when working with a diverse audience". Before settling for this option, I believe we should consider where this policy of focusing on IS-interpreting is taking us. Is access in national signed languages prioritized, or are we increasingly settling for something else?

To be absolutely clear, let me finally reiterate that I am discussing interpreted presentations, not direct communication. There is a difference in the amount of detail that can be conveyed when you interpret into/from a real, national signed language compared to when you interpret into/from International Sign. As an interpreter, I have to admit to wondering whether the current development is really what is best for our profession, and for all participants in various settings that rely on our services.

⁸ <https://www.eud.eu/about-us/eud-position-paper/international-sign-guidelines/> (Accessed 20 June, 2020.)

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