

## **Rethinking sign language interpreting: a broader perspective on 'access'**

*In Denmark, we often discuss sign language interpreting. And often with great concern, whether it is about the number of sign language interpreters available, the quality of the interpreting provided, or the way sign language interpreting services are funded, booked, and structured. It is widely accepted that sign language interpreting is important for ensuring deaf people's access in society. But is sign language interpreting the only solution? That was the topic of the Danish Deaf Associations membership magazines conversation with dr Maartje De Meulder (University of Applied Sciences Utrecht) and dr Hilde Hualand (OsloMet).*

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Over the years, extensive research has been done into various aspects of sign language interpreting, from the training of sign language interpreters, to the quality of sign language interpreting, the numbers of sign language interpreters, and so on. However, researchers Maartje De Meulder and Hilde Hualand want to look at it differently. "We want a broader perspective on sign language interpreting," Hilde says. They look at sign language interpreting on three different levels: micro, meso, and macro levels. This helps to understand sign language interpreting as a system rather than an isolated activity.

While giving presentations about this topic, Hilde and Maartje have noticed that many people were surprised to learn that a system exists. "Many have not thought about it before in this way," Maartje says.

### **From everyday life to ideologies**

"Most research has been done on the micro and meso levels," Maartje explains. "The meso level is what people actually see that needs to improve in a very tangible way, so therefore it is easier to focus on. For example the quality of sign language interpreting needs to improve, sign language interpreters need more and better training, sign language interpreters need better salaries, we want more deaf interpreters, a more diverse cohort of sign language interpreters, and so on." "These are important issues, but are they the only ones we should focus on?" Maartje asks.

"No, because if we only focus on these issues, we lose sight of the big picture: Why do we have sign language interpreters in the first place? Which underlying system is sign language interpreting based on? Who benefits from that specific system? We like the idea of sign language interpreting giving us access. But it does not always do so. So, it is important that we look at sign language interpreting from a broader perspective - that is, from a macro perspective. From that perspective, we can examine the ideologies that function as the system's building blocks," she explains.

Hilde adds, "It is important to look at how certain ideologies affect the system. By examining the macro level, we can evaluate how the entire system is structured. And we need to look at this structure critically; does the current system work, or is there actually a better alternative way? If we do not look at the big picture, then the same problems will just keep happening over and over again." By the same problems, Hilde refers to the recurring discussions of for example the qualifications and training of sign language interpreters and that deaf people do not always understand the sign language interpreters provided to them.

"Is it actually all about a need for sign language interpreters with better qualifications and a higher quality of interpreting? Or is it perhaps more about trying to view it differently? Maybe more hospital staff could learn sign language, and deaf schools could be revalued? Direct communication

is always the best. Of course, sign language interpreters are essential, but there is a balance to consider," says Hilde.

*Is it realistic for hospital staff to learn sign language and for more people in general to speak sign language?*

Hilde and Maartje both smile. "We get this question a lot," says Hilde. "In the Nordic countries, we have had trained sign language interpreters for almost 40 years. But we have neglected to train other professionals, for example doctors, nurses, and teachers. We have given the public and our surrounding society only limited opportunities to learn sign language or to learn more about deaf people."

Hilde continues, "Deaf people are small in numbers, and Rome was not built in a day. Initiatives could start in larger cities. Offer training there. Train and recruit more sign language proficient trainers and maybe offer sign language training in settings of deaf schools so the training takes place within deaf and sign language communities. Teach sign language and raise public awareness about deaf people. This way, deaf people will be able to choose for themselves whether they want direct communication or a sign language interpreter in different situations. And it also means that valuable information will be shared. The doctor at the hospital might not speak sign language themselves, but would have at least some knowledge about deaf people. This would already make everything easier when the sign language interpreter arrives. Communication options are broader than just sign language interpreting. But it requires of us to re-think, and change the system."

### **Human rights are not equivalent to needs**

In recent years, human rights have increasingly become an important factor in political debates. This is also the case for The Danish Deaf Association (DDL). The association is now officially both a human rights organization and a disability organization. We often discuss deaf people's right to sign language interpreting. With Maartje and Hilde's perspectives, maybe we put too much emphasis on human rights - and rights in general?

"First and foremost, there is a distinction to be made between human rights and legal rights. Human rights are much more comprehensive and widespread than legal rights. Legal rights are governed by a country's national laws. But regardless, rights can come into conflict with needs. What I'm legally entitled to, may not necessarily be what I get, or want. I may have the right to sign language interpreting, but this might not be provided. Or vice versa; maybe interpreting is provided because there is a legal right, but it is not what I actually need, or want. Rights are based on an ideological system", Maartje says.

"Why do we put so much emphasis on the right to sign language interpreting? Deaf people have the right to access to health services, education, and so on. Sign language interpreting is not a right, it's a tool to achieve a right," says Hilde. "Yes, and the tool has now become the end goal. But it should not be," says Maartje.

*So, less emphasis on rights?*

"I would rather say more emphasis on accessibility. Accessibility is many things. It is not just a sign language interpreter," says Hilde.

*How do we move forward from here? As deaf associations and as deaf individuals?*

"Deaf associations and deaf communities need to understand that sign language interpreting is just one part of a much larger system. It is important that we start having that conversation," says Maartje. "And that conversation should also be had with sign language interpreters. Not as individual interpreters, but as a professional group. They are also part of the same system. As a professional group, they have a significant influence on deaf people's lives, and they need to realize that," explains Maartje.

"We need to be able to talk more openly about sign language interpreting. Sign language interpreters cannot merely say that they are neutral and that they are 'just' interpreting. They are not. They are powerful actors in their own way, as a group. It is important to talk about that. In some situations, sign language interpreting just does not work. Both deaf people and sign language interpreters need to be honest enough to admit that and say it out loud. Many deaf people tend to believe that sign language interpreting is the best solution. If it does not work in a given situation, they just accept that, or attribute it to the mediocre quality of an individual sign language interpreter, for example. But they should speak up and talk about it. And vice versa, sign language interpreters should know their limitations - and stand by them. Sign language interpreters as a professional group should be able to say: We can and will do this and that, but we cannot and will not do this and that - instead of thinking that they as sign language interpreters can do it all," says Hilde.

*The power dynamic between sign language interpreters and deaf people is potentially a dangerous topic of conversation. How can we start the dialogue and maintain good collaboration?*

"Oh, I can go on about that for a long time," Maartje smiles. "On a micro level, there will always be those interpreters that are skilled and those that are not. On a macro level however, you can see the power dynamics within the system." Maartje gives an example, "As a sign language interpreter, you can generally pick and choose which assignments you interpret. You can say yes and no as you wish. But deaf people cannot. They might sometimes need almost to beg and plead just to get a sign language interpreter. The system is completely disproportioned, often in the favour of sign language interpreters. In many countries, there are freelance sign language interpreters. They often work alone, and are not monitored regarding quality. The sign language interpreter becomes invisible and "just interprets". That can happen because the system is structured accordingly. The power dynamic is there. And it is unequal."

Hilde suggests making use of the often existing agreements between deaf associations and the associations of sign language interpreters as a starting point. That way, a dialogue can be established. Not with individual interpreters, but with the interpreters as a professional group. "We need to find the courage to have an open and honest dialogue," she says.

### **More than one communication solution**

If sign language interpreting is not the answer, then it must mean that we as deaf people must accept a lower level of communication? For example, we might have to write or gesture instead of signing. I am expressing my concern to Maartje and Hilde.

Maartje says, "First and foremost, we need to stop thinking that sign language interpreting equals full inclusion. Sign language interpreting is fine and good. But it is not the only way to communicate. Writing or gesturing does not necessarily lower the level of communication. It is just another way of

communicating. Automatic speech-to-text applications are providing new opportunities in some contexts. What works will depend on the specific person's abilities. We cannot simply rank sign language interpreting as the leading or 'higher' mode of communication."

"Deaf people, hearing professionals, and sign language interpreters need training and knowledge about the opportunities and the limits of sign language interpreting. Deaf children need this too. They need to learn that there are other options beside sign language interpreters. If deaf children are mainstreamed in regular schools and are only provided sign language interpreters, then that is what they (and their peers, teachers, etc.) will learn; that sign language interpreters are the solution. They will not learn that there are other possibilities," explains Maartje.

*In Denmark, I feel it is somewhat of a no-go to accept writing as a mode of communication. We are taught that we have the right to sign language interpreting and that we should not compromise on that. Could it be a way forward if deaf associations focused more on communication strategies rather than the right to sign language interpreting?*

"It is an interesting question. Also, a bit risky," says Hilde. "Norway - and Denmark - are welfare states. Sign language interpreting is provided under that welfare system, so in a way we do not have to write and gesture. But in other countries, they do not have welfare systems. Sometimes, deaf people must pay for sign language interpreting themselves - if they even have interpreters in their respective countries. Deaf and hearing people communicate in different ways, using gestures and adapting to each other. That also works, in some situations. We cannot have sign language interpreters with us all the time," says Hilde.

"But," she says, "we need to be careful not to lose hard-won rights. Governments might think that all is fine and good - deaf people can manage on their own. I believe it is better for deaf associations to focus on the bigger picture instead. That means focusing on the entire system which sign language interpreting is a part of. More focus on accessibility in multiple ways - not just sign language interpreting."

You can watch Maartje and Hilde's presentation on sign language interpreting and inclusion at <https://maartjedemeulder.be/>