

Innovación e investigación educativa para la formación docente

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CAPÍTULO 39.

FROM VOIDNESS TO LANGUAGE: THE SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Isabel Correia, Pedro Custódio y Rafaela Silva

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to describe the challenges and strategies that a Portuguese sign language interpreter must face while interpreting classes at university. This role can be challenging for any interpreter as they have to convey scientific subjects, specific terms and other particularities of a university class that require preparation and knowledge that goes beyond linguistic fluency. However, it can be said that this task is even more challenging when faced with sign language interpretation.

To understand this statement let's begin by characterising sign languages briefly. Then, Deaf education in Portugal will be looked at, mainly in what concerns to legal documents that define it and normative laws that establish the role of a sign language interpreter. We will then give some examples of how the situation applies in Portuguese higher education nowadays. After this, some practical examples are given of what an interpreter must face while interpreting classes and other contexts in a university.

2. FROM SIGN LANGUAGE TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Sign languages have existed since the beginning of times and, like other languages, it is not possible to know when they began to be used. There are some theories that suggest that sign languages were the first to be used by humans (Stokoe, 2001) and others that say that vocal and visual languages were used simultaneously (Woll, 2009) or that, on the contrary, they had distinct paths (Everett, 2018). The intention is not to discuss a subject that is unlikely to ever have an accurate answer. However, awareness of sign languages recognition is quite recent when compared to vocal languages. Using the Portuguese situation as an example, in political terms Portuguese sign language was recognized in

1997, whereas Portuguese oral language was accepted as an official language in 1214, as can be seen in King Afonso the 2nd's will (Castro, 2001). Obviously, this does not establish a date for language usage, but at the very least it gives an idea of how Portuguese Sign Language was not acknowledged by society. This linguistic invisibility language that uses hand movement is due to deaf education and the way deaf people were (and maybe still are) not seen by the majority of society.

Deaf education began to be formal in the 16th century when Pedro Ponce de León taught a young deaf heir how to read and write (Carvalho, 2007). From then, books on manual alphabets started to appear, such as the *Reduction de las letras e arte para enseñar a ablar a los mudos* in 1620. From Juan Pablo Bonet and methodologies of how to teach the “deaf-mute” which start to be increasingly more consistent. This interest is mainly due to two of the most well-known teachers for the deaf, Jacob Rodrigues Pereira and Charles Michel de l'Épée. The first was known for being a defender of the Oralist method: the way for deaf people learn to read and write was to speak. The second favoured sign language as the wisest way to teach deaf people reading and writing. (Carvalho, 2007). Besides this, Pereira was a tutor and L'Épée was a teacher, as the first gave individual classes and the second set up the first school for the deaf (their wellness or social condition notwithstanding). Nowadays it is known that the border between oralist/ signed languages supporters was bleak (Carvalho, 2013). However, in the middle of these disputes and book publishing on deaf education and signed languages (Péllissier, 1856) the deaf community was still separate from society and seen as lab rats or handicapped (Lane, 1992). The Milan congress in 1880 compounded the distance between deaf and hearing: sign languages were prohibited in schools. The deaf community went from being a minority to being controlled by the hearing majority. They were not only a minority. They were an underground group with an “illegal” language. But that was the language that they used to communicate whilst hidden from the eyes of those that could hear.

Almost one century later, in the 20th century, deaf education started to change and oralism was abandoned (Carvalho, 2007). Sign languages started to be free and part of the curriculum in schools for the deaf. Nowadays in Portugal sign language teachers have been recognized as teachers since 2018 (law 16/2018). This long journey towards equality is just starting. Schools for the deaf have sign language interpreters and sign language teachers, and deaf students learn Portuguese as a second language. The government provides these resources from elementary school through to high school, the mandatory years of education in Portugal. All deaf students that go to these schools have the right to

have sign language taught and sign language interpretation. Their curriculum is adapted considering their specific needs, such as the teaching of music, Portuguese, and an interpreter in all the subjects. Since most teachers of the deaf are not proficient users of sign language, and considering that deaf students have classes with hearing students, the presence of an interpreter is crucial. As the Portuguese Republic Constitution states, Portuguese sign language is the language in deaf education that must be preserved and valued (Constituição da República, artigo 74º,2, alínea h). The SLI must fulfil linguistic competences, such as having graduation in interpreting and translation, as defined by the law 89/99. Thus, equity is guaranteed through linguistic accessibility. This linguistic minority that was once oppressed is now flourishing thanks to equal opportunities. However, this journey is not without its challenges.

2.1. A bridge to nowhere? Linguistic equity in deaf education

Since Portuguese Sign Language is mandatory for curriculum access, more and more deaf people go to school. Deaf people study and want to learn more. Mandatory education is not enough; they want to be teachers, doctors, lawyers, designers. They want to go to university. This is where newer challenges appear. The Portuguese government does not provide interpreters to work in universities. The path of language accessibility and equity is interrupted if the deaf student wants more. Nevertheless, due to the increase of demand for higher education and pressure from deaf students, some universities provide interpreters for their students using their own budget or through scholarships. It is hard to say how many institutions do this because of lacking data in this field. Two of examples in which this occurs are in two Polytechnics that have deaf students in their curriculum, Porto, and Coimbra's Polytechnics.

Recent research by Miguel Santos (2019) states that “deaf students are frequently included in classes’ activities and in many classes- although not always- have a sign language interpreter” (Santos, 2019, p. 171, translation by the authors). The phrase not always determines one of the reasons why, as Santos points out in his study, deaf students feel excluded. Most university teachers or hearing students do not know sign language, nor are much aware of its existence as language, contributing to this failure. However, if institutions accept deaf students, sooner or later they will feel included and their language starts to be visible to all the academic community. This is what happens in Coimbra's College of Education (CCE).

In 2005 a new graduation course started in CCE, Portuguese Sign Language. This new course accepted deaf and hearing students and had interpreters in classes. Later, around 2010, other deaf students began to feel interested in other graduations and due to institutional will, if there is a deaf student, there has been an interpreter in all classes, conferences, events, meetings, academic issues, essentially everything. A small community of young deaf students meet at CCE and interact. In class, they have full linguistic access to all content. Slowly, all teachers are becoming aware of what being deaf means and the necessary linguistic adaptation. Simultaneously, the course in Sign Language continues to grow, projects in sign language flourish and a new Masters has recently begun. Nowadays other schools from Coimbra's Polytechnic, such as the Business School have accepted deaf students and immediately provided an interpreter. The same situation occurred in Engineering School. The seed has been sown and is now spreading.

In Porto's Polytechnic there is a similar situation. Santos (2019) states that Porto's College of Education has an internal procedure dedicated to students with specific needs and deaf students are among those. Thus, they have interpreters in classes and other institutional events and other support measures related to evaluation criteria (Santos, 2019, pp, 176-175).

We are aware of other similar examples, but, as stated above, there is no accurate data on these, some institutions have interpreters but not in all classes, others do not fund the interpreter, thus, the student must pay for the service. Despite all of these constraints, it seems that universities are slowly beginning to look at this specific linguistic need by providing the first and most crucial resource, the interpreter. Unfortunately, reduced budgets do not always allow equity and the bridge can be broken, leading to nowhere. It is important to show good practices, as the ones mentioned above, to motivate other universities and the government to be aware that inclusion and Universal Design do not end at mandatory education.

2.2.1. Are you the interpreter? Can you please explain this subject to the deaf student?

When all goes well, the deaf student enters the classroom and there is someone, often dressed in black, ready to adapt the teacher's voice to sign language and to voice the student's signs.

These are the functions of the interpreter; however, the teacher is often not aware of their purpose and mixes the roles of this professional. It is important to clarify that the interpreter translates. They do not teach, explain, clarify, or assist the teacher. If there is a good dissemination of the interpreter's role in the campus, the inexperienced teacher rapidly becomes an expert in role definition. But this is just one of the challenges of the interpreter.

When a language is oppressed, prohibited, and marginalized, its course is not as fluid as the one the other language that runs free inside the community. One of the major obstacles of the sign language interpreter (SLI) is the lack of terminology. Imagine what it is like to translate a chemistry class to a language that has no term for molecules, for example sulfuric acid. Or a math class that deals with trigonometry. A Portuguese class that aims to transmit poetry, grammar and still has no established term for subjunctive, modal verb, among others. How is it then possible to provide language equity and curriculum accessibility when there is still no established lexicon? How is the interpreter supposed to master subjects that can go from enology to social media or computer programs? The sections below detail, in the first person, how an interpreter that works in a Higher Education Institution, CCE, deals with these challenges and constraints.

3. INTERPRETING FROM THE VOID? SCHOOL SIGNS AND LINGUISTIC PLASTICITY

Working as a SLI at the university is such a challenge, facing new and different situations, every day. Certainly, there is be no monotony, however, sometimes there are unexpected situations that come from the fact that the interpreter's role is quite independent from the class and that, contrary to other levels of education, the interpreter is not an individual who is involved in a team.

The interpreter should have knowledge of many different areas depending, obviously, on the subjects. Besides the classes, the interpreter has to go with the deaf student to the different services in school such as academic services, social workers, student support offices or any other services that students need to go to. Furthermore, interpreters work with deaf student's colleagues thus they need to interpret group works, either in the classroom or outside of it. Sometimes hearing colleagues may feel that they can't communicate with their deaf counterpart, making it difficult for the deaf student to

join them in group work. On the other hand, the deaf student may not feel comfortable working only with hearing people, and for that reason the interpreter's role and presence is crucial to establishing communication.

This professional can be seen as someone who should be the mediator between the student and the teacher, helping to strengthen a relationship that would never become effective without the interpreter because of the linguistic barrier.

To do that, the interpreter will carry their work based on what they have learned during their college course. This refers to not only theoretical knowledge but also, and above all, to practical knowledge. As Cabral & Silva (2021) said

Translating from one language to another is more than knowing vocabulary and figures of speech. Many techniques and strategies must be used, bringing signs and meanings to words, not limited to this codification. The meaning of the discourse, its directionality and its objectivity must be known. It is essential to understand that it is not simply fundamental in the search for a correspondent (...)" (p. 32561, author's translation)

WITH THIS IN MIND, SOME ASPECTS THAT MAY INFLUENCE THE INTERPRETER'S WORK ARE SEEN.4. DISCUSSION

For a long time ago, interpreters have become a part of educational landscape in levels of compulsory education. Over the last few years there has been greater visibility in higher education. However, "despite longevity in the classroom, the role and function of the interpreter is often confusing and distracting" (National Deaf Center, 2018, p.1) which can lead to an enormous number of constraints and challenges to the interpreter's duties.

As has been said before, the interpreters' role in classroom has to be very clear to the teacher with whom they are working with, as well as for the student. It is very common to deal with situations that can be uncomfortable for the interpreter such as: the teachers directly asking the interpreter things about the deaf student or, after classes, the student going to search for the interpreter to find information that has been given during the class. Besides, some teachers may look to the interpreter as a friend of the deaf student or someone who is there to help him and do not realize the true nature of their work and that actually, most of the times, the interpreter doesn't even know the deaf person. The reality is that the student should be autonomous in their study, should be responsible in going to

classes and should care for their tasks, just like any other student. In fact, the interpreters “are not responsible for the student’s attendance and/or classroom effort” (National Deaf Center, 2018, p.1), an effort that belongs exclusively to the student. For that reason, it is up to the interpreter to deal with these situations and to find the best way to stay away from these responsibilities that go beyond their professional functions.

Before that, the first constraint that might happen is related to the place where the interpreter sits - some classrooms are not adapted and most of the time the interpreter has their back to the board or the slide projection which limits the visibility. Besides, the interpreter’s position can interfere with the students’ view of the board. Also, teachers who have never worked with SLI may initially think “who is this person that stays behind me and not in front of me?”. The place where the interpreter sits in the classroom may be a little annoying to the person responsible for the class who is not used to be side-by-side with someone. For that reason, and to avoid uncomfortable situations, the interpreter should raise awareness of their role as well as the position they should occupy in the classroom.

When you have an interpreter in a classroom, it opens up the possibility that the deaf student gets the information in their own language, which respects their condition (Guarinello, Santana, Figueiredo & Massi, 2008). For that reason, for deaf students to be able to have equal access to all the given information and also to ensure that what it is being transmitted is done with fidelity and quality, it is crucial that interpreters have prior access to the content that will be taught. One of the biggest difficulties for the interpreter is not having previous knowledge about the subject (Guarinello, Santana, Figueiredo & Massi, 2008). In fact, some teachers are reluctant in sharing their class materials, which would make the interpreter's job so much easier. Powell (2013) claims that “lecturers can be quite possessive about their intellectual property. They don’t want to give us their notes and they don’t understand that our ethics mean we’re not going to hand them out. All we want is information which are the tools so we can do our job.” (Powell, 2013, p.300). Effectively, SLI have a code of ethics that govern their work that forces them not to share the class materials that they have access to, and which only serves for interpreter’s preparation in order to do the best job possible. The same author said that “the nature of lecture styles, means that the interpreter really needs to be familiar with the environment and preferably have subject-specific knowledge” (Powell, 2013, p. 300) and that this can only be achieved with previous contact with the subject. Of course, this implies that the interpreter dedicates time for preparation, leading to another important issue - the

interpreter's work is not only inside the classroom. To perform well in the classroom, there is a lot of background work done at home with research and discussion with the deaf community members, meaning that “the interpreter must become familiar with the course contents that will be discussed – a task that may involve additional research on topic-related words and phrases – and the signs needed to convey them” (National Deaf Center, 2018, p.1).

As previously stated, classes can be very demanding for interpreters, especially if there are no breaks. Usually, the university methodology is to have a lot of theoretical classes that can last a few hours. In fact, “the complexity of lecture information and related lexical and cognitive intricacies are a challenge for interpreters working at this level” (Powell, 2013, p. 301) and for that reason, the interpreter should have the right to resting periods. Classes may be two or even four hours long, and without any breaks it will be exhausting and requires almost superhuman efforts. As witnessed by an interpreter “you come out, and you're physically very sore, your neck, your arms, your shoulders, and your wrists might be bad, and mentally [pause] well your brain is just like mush and you can't cope after that” (Powell, 2013, p. 300). To continue to perform well, interpreters need to have some breaks.

Deaf people must learn some specific terminology about the class (called jargon) and it is imperative that deaf students have access to them in the same way. What happens is that sometimes interpreters use fingerspelling to transmit that word, and then a new sign is created. But, even so, it is important that deaf student can connect the sign to the specific term. For example, if one wanted to translate *vinculation* related to early intervention in childhood, this would be done with the signs BABY+MOM+CONNECTION with the expectation that, this code, would be understood as well as the specific term and its designation. Also, for this kind of situation, preparation is very useful so interpreters may know, in a timely manner, what kind of words will show up. In this case, the teacher may write the term on the board so, not only the interpreter will check if the fingerspelling is correct, but also allowing the deaf students to learn how to write down the term.

There are a lot of concepts used in different degrees that do not yet have corresponding signs, either because it is a new area to the deaf community or because it is not a habit to talk about that subject in the community, making it unknown vocabulary to the people who use sign language. The fact is that interpreters that have more experience may have a range of strategies to handle unfamiliar lexical items. However,

what could be a very useful strategy is the interpreter, in partnership with the deaf student, may create some sign code and with that, be able to find a solution that could be functional when interpreting the content, thereby benefiting both parties.

As Crasbon & Bloem (2014) said

the small lexicon encourages signers to all kinds of ‘creative signing’: creating new signs on-the-spot with a free combination of existing signs, new iconic forms, fingerspelling, and mouthing and other facial expressions. These signs will often be clear to native signers understanding the context in which they were invented (p.9)

This means that, with the interpreter and the students’ approval, school signs are created. In this context, sometimes the codes can be based on some concept explanation as the example seen before for *vinculation*. Another example is, for instance: the code used for *arbitrariness* which is ICONIC+NOT.RELATED. On the other hand, there are codes which are simply one sign created with the student and interpreter’s agreement. To illustrate that, the name of computer programs such as *scratch* and *python* that are commonly translated as PROGRAM+CAT and PROGRAM+SNAKE, respectively, alluding to the icons that represent the programs.

In addition to everything previously explained, sign language interpreters may face some problems when dealing with language variation (Crasborn & Bloem, 2007). The truth is that most of the times the interpreters don’t previously know the student with whom they will work, they don’t know their language level, which can represent a problem not only when interpreting for sign language but also when there are situations of voicing. For example, when a deaf student makes an intervention in the classroom using SL and the interpreter must voice what is being communicated, if the interpreter is not prepared for that it may impact the deaf student’s evaluation negatively. It is very important that the interpreter has the chance to get to know the student, their language and linguistic level so they can both be aligned, reducing the chances that the interpreter harm the student's performance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As discussed, interpreting in Higher Education is a recent field with specific needs. The deaf community has come a long way in a short time. Only two centuries ago their language was restricted and oppressed. Political measures ended this situation and linguistic freedom gave way to linguistic accessibility. However, this is still an early stage

of full access for all. Lack of funding and awareness still exists, but small steps towards effective inclusion are visible.

The aim was to present some practical situations involving interpreting so that other interpreters and academic staff may think about their own constraints and challenges - For that, practical examples of what are faced in our daily routine were given, such as the lack of information of what an interpreter is, the discomfort of exchanging class guidelines and materials because of the lack of teacher trust and awareness. However, some small but important steps are being made in some university classes, and the presence of the interpreter is a growing reality. Besides what this represents for the deaf community and for mankind, the language itself gains structure, vocabulary and power becoming a language for all and overcoming this challenge could be the greatest reward for academic staff in the field of deaf education.

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