

ISSUES IN BULGARIAN SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING

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Abstract

The article discusses the current state of sign language interpreting in Bulgaria. It analyzes a range of historical, social and professional issues regarding policymaking, sign language education and methodology. Presented here are three interrelated factors influencing the interpreting practice in the country such as limited knowledge about the linguistic status of Bulgarian Sign Language, traditions in Bulgarian deaf education and social attitude of the hearing majority regarding the linguistic skills of deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Keywords: Bulgarian Sign Language, signed language, sign language interpreting, translation, deaf, hard-of-hearing

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Sign language interpreting is a particularly popular topic today because of the increasing demands of society to provide equality to deaf and hard-of-hearing people based on the recognition of sign language¹ and cultural heritage acknowledgement. The growing importance of sign language communities and deaf empowerment puts interpreting at the centre of theoretical and practical analysis of many professionals from different fields of knowledge. Nowadays, interpreting policy deals with both hearing and deaf people as sign language interpreters working in a team on the ground that deaf signers can bring their knowledge and deaf experience to the sign language interpreting profession (Adam, Stone, Collins, & Metzger, 2014). It is suggested that deaf-hearing interpreter teams providing interpreting, translation, and transliteration could make available nuanced comprehension and interaction in a wide range of visual language and communication forms.

The notion of interpreting is also being discussed in relation to the educational settings and deaf education in particular. Livingston (1997) writes about the need for teachers to be interpreters for deaf students. She believes interpreting can ensure learning success and understanding of any subject and suggests that only natural sign language as a means of communication and instruction can provide for deaf students understanding of particular idea throughout assisting them in understanding it at the same time while creating the context within which the meaning can be made and shared. Educational interpreting is of particular relevance because of the inclusion policy and increasing number of deaf student being educated alongside their hearing peers.

Regardless of the setting where interpreting takes place, it always happens when people do not share a common language. Sign language interpreters (SLI) are responsible for helping deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to understand the information in any spoken/oral language. Traditionally, “interpretation” is the process of conveying a message generated in one language into an equivalent message in another language (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005), while “translation” refers mainly to written communication. Therefore, traditional definitions of translation fail to account for sign language interpretation as sign languages do not have a written form, although there is an attempt to represent sign elements orthographically called “sign writing”. It is interesting to notice that translation is valid to sign language interpretation as well when transfer of

¹ Here, “sign language” is used as a generic term that includes signed languages such as American Sign Language, Australian Sign Language or other recognized national signed languages.

thoughts and idea includes natural language and secondary, or contrived, representations of language (Ingram, 1985).

The main differences between signed and spoken interpreting is the language modality - spoken language interpreters rely on aural/oral approaches while signed language interpreters deal with aural/oral and manual/visual modalities. Defining terminology in the fields of signed interpreting is implicitly related to the notion of sign languages and various forms of production in visual modality recognized by the broad term “manual communication” (Bornstein, 1990).

Basic concepts in sign language interpreting

Just like spoken languages, sign languages are naturally developing human languages. Extensive research on different national sign languages has shown that they are independent linguistic systems with their own grammar and lexicon and not representations of spoken languages (Stokoe, 1960; Klima & Belugi, 1979; Liddell, 2003). In other words, the correlation between natural sign languages and spoken/oral languages is complex and depends on the culture of their users more than the country where users live. For instance, although English is the dominant language in the United States and UK, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language are historically and grammatically unrelated. ASL is closer to French Sign Language due to their historical connection. Therefore, each sign language is a distinct language. According to the 16th edition of the Summer Institute of Linguistics Ethnologue, there are 130 listed Deaf² sign languages (Lewis, 2009). I doubt this number is representative considering that every year new sign languages are being discovered, new rural areas are linguistically researched.

Deaf people are born, live and got to school among and together with hearing people. Everyday situations put oral and sign languages in constant contact and create opportunities for sociolinguistic variations. The first sociolinguistic research was conducted by Stokoe, (1960) in the American Deaf Community. He introduced ‘simultaneous communication’ as an aural and a visual communication system of the

² Following current convention, “Deaf” (with a capital D) is used to refer to Deaf culture and those individuals who share the culture, while “deaf” (with a small d) is used to refer to the audiological condition of the deafness (Woodward, 1972).

simultaneous use of signed and spoken English. He characterized ASL/English usage in Deaf community as “untypical” diglossic situation of ASL and Manually Coded English (Stokoe, 1960). “Bimodal communication” introduced as a term by Messing (1994) also suggests simultaneous use of words/signs while speaking, with the only difference related to the speaker's intentional desire to communicate in only one of the languages. Bimodal communication can occur with either the spoken or the signed language being the primary one used in a given conversation. Not as much as the degree of the hearing loss, but the signed conversation experience and overall linguistic competence of the signer determine his/her choice, intentionally or not, to produce speech close to the national spoken language as a structure and sign order or away from the spoken language syntax. Language contact between sign languages and spoken languages is the focus of many subsequent sociolinguistic studies in the USA. The outcome was defined as a pidgin (Woodward, 1972) or “contact signing” (Lucas & Valli, 1992). Most of the linguistic contact phenomena are examined such as code switching as well as regional and social variations, bilingualism, language attitude, language planning and choice (Battison, 1978; Ann, 2001). Social variables and linguistic variables and their effect on sign languages and deaf people's behaviour are explored and variables strongly related to the Deaf communities appointed – those corresponding to the audiological status of the signer's parents, age of sign language acquisition (learned signing before the age of six), and attended educational institution (special or mainstream school) (Woodward, 1972).

Simultaneous sign language interpretation describes the situation when the information is delivered almost in parallel with the production on the original message. Communication may go one-way when SLI provides information from spoken language to a particular sign language or two-ways – communication is more interactive and puts greater demand on the SLI as he/she needs to be aware of the linguistic competence of the signer. In one-to-one encounters, it is SLI's choice whether to deliver the signer's message voicing it simultaneously or consecutively.

Interpreting for deaf students in educational setting is especially challenging because it requires the interpreter to have a broad knowledge and skills to facilitate communication in the auditory and visual modalities. Each student based on its personal, educational and overall sociability may perform linguistically different using sign language or sign supported speech (spoken-based sign systems or visual representations

of a particular oral language). Everything that is spoken in the presence of an interpreter and a deaf student must be mediated appropriately in accordance to the student's preferred mode of signed communication and sign selection. If the deaf person relies on information presented primarily via natural sign language, the SLI is required to work between two different languages "interpreting" the information. "Transliteration" on the other hand "requires an interpreter to work between spoken English and one of several contact varieties that incorporate linguistic features from both English and ASL" (Livingston, Singer, & Abramson, 1994, p. 2). Transliteration is often requested by hard-of-hearing people from hearing families, late deafened signers whose dominant and preferred means of communication is in aural/oral modality usually because of the more frequent and intense interactions with hearing people. There are two forms of transliteration – signed using gestural modality or oral for deaf people who are not signers. Oral transliteration does not include a formal sign language, however, respectfully by the students' needs and requested by them, oral transliterators are expected to add natural gesture, fingerspell words and use cued system to visualize hard-to-see letters. Translitterators might also support deaf student conversationally by lip reading, especially important when the hearing speakers have challenging articulation or unclear speech. "Voice interpreting", on the other hand, takes place when deaf people have difficulties to comprehend voice and pronunciation, so the oral transliterator repeats the message to the listener for clarification. There are also other visual and tactual communication forms used primarily by deaf visually impaired people, such as "tactile sign language" and "tactile fingerspelling" (Jacobs, 1997).

This list of interpreting forms is not exhaustive. The interpreting concepts and issues presented here are associated to the analysis of the Bulgarian situation as far as sign language interpreting is concerned – where it has been and where we are now, following the traditions and new trends in the field.

Bulgarian sign language interpreting

The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012 puts Bulgaria in demand of Bulgarian Sign Language³ (BGS�) recognition and support to Bulgarian deaf people educationally and socially through their language and

³ Transliteration of the Bulgarian Sign language in English is "gestural-mimic language"

by respecting their own cultural values. Bulgaria officially accepted the challenges and has been working hard to fulfil the requirements and develop sign language friendly policy implementing Bulgarian sign language in the educational system. This process brings Bulgarian traditions in oral education to face the modern social approach to deafness and deaf people.

According to Wheatley and Pabsch (2012), the listed number of active SLI in Bulgaria is 46, which surely is an overestimated number. Maya de Wit (2017) presented her research data on the status of the SLI profession in over 45 countries and regions worldwide at the Third International Conference of the World Federation of the Deaf in Budapest. She reported that interpreting services continue to be challenging for many countries. Finland, according to her analysis, is the country with the highest deaf person-interpreter ratio (8:1), while in Bulgaria one SLI is assigned to serve for 2609 deaf people. Experience shows that Deaf Bulgarians rely on their relatives to a greater extent than to sign language interpreters, unless the latter are hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs). CODA interpreters possess the necessary cultural and language knowledge to offer quality service without a solid foundation in interpreting.

In my view, the interpreting policy in Bulgaria was influenced and perhaps limited by at least three interrelated factors:

1. Limited knowledge of the linguistic status and structure of Bulgarian Sign Language.
2. Educational history and traditions in deaf education in general and particularly the relationship between the Bulgarian language and the Bulgarian Sign Language.
3. The attitude of the majority of hearing people towards deaf people in terms of their linguistic needs and abilities.

Legislation and status of Bulgarian Sign Language

In regards to the first aspect, BGSL is still officially not recognized as a true language scientifically and at a state level. Not until recently since the first paper on BGSL linguistic research was written (Lozanova, 2015; Lozanova & Stoyanova, 2015) and later on a national survey by a team of linguists along with Bulgarian Deaf was

conducted, most hearing people, including many special teachers, psychologists, and linguists, claimed that deaf people use gestural elements of nonverbal communication combined in a system (Videnov, 2011). And indeed, not much linguistic work has been done on Bulgarian sign language. What is available today tends to indicate that BGSL is an independent language with its own grammatical and semantic structure; it appears to share some general linguistic principles and features with other sign languages, such as American Sign Language and Russian Sign Language (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017a). Bulgarian Sign Language is presented in three printed dictionaries – Concise Dictionary of Bulgarian mimic language consisting of 700 signs, published in 1961 (Yanulov, Radulov & Georgiev, 1961); Dictionary of Bulgarian gestural-mimic language of 3000 signs in two editions, including video format (Bulgarian Union of the Deaf, 1996). A supplementary part to the dictionaries is a text presenting thematically organized phrases in Bulgarian language supported by signs (Mosheva & Gancheva, 2005). The most recent publication in this area is Dictionary of Bulgarian sign language (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017) where 5000 signs of BGSL are introduced and organized by the configuration of the dominant hand of each sign, unlike the previous dictionaries in which the sign lexicon is thematically presented. At the moment, intensive work is being done on investigating the nature of the BGSL – linguistic description and analysis. Besides the linguistic information, there is a need to focus on problems related to the status of the sign language and its acceptance as a mode of communication in the community at large, and particularly among hearing parents of deaf children. Historically, parents have been advised not to learn and expose their children to sign language because it would prevent the acquisition of the Bulgarian language. Despite existing evidence in literature that early exposure of children to sign language enhances their aptitude for acquiring spoken language (Magnuson, 2000), Bulgarian educators and therapists still have doubts and reservations about the role of natural sign language for children's overall development and language competence.

Educational background

One of the reasons for this scepticism are the traditional roots framing Bulgarian deaf educational policy which stems from the classical methodology within the scope of the auditory-oral approach in both intervention and education of deaf children. In accordance to this methodology, the deaf have been taught to speak, write and lipread

using their residual hearing. The expected outcomes of their education are supposed to be successful mainstreaming and more social opportunities in life. In line with oral education principles, the language of instruction in Bulgarian special schools is Bulgarian spoken language. It is used by hearing teachers as a language of communication formally and informally – in and outside the class. BGSL is officially regulated as a supportive tool in teaching any subject area and signing is declared to provide only visual access to Bulgarian language. The primary goal of education is Bulgarian language in its spoken, written and signed forms. Although some professionals claim that “Bulgarian sign language” is being used, from linguistic perspective Signed Bulgarian performed simultaneously mediates the process of learning and teaching (at least on theory). Moreover, Bulgarian represented by signs is the end goal of deaf education as deaf students are expected to communicate primarily with hearing people, behave as such and possess knowledge on “proper” sign language. It is axiomatic that knowing the language is a prerequisite to include it in the educational system both as a source language and a target language, so only changing the mindset of professionals about what the real language of the Deaf is, can lead to positive development and change in the qualification of SLI and special teachers working with deaf students.

Attitude of the hearing society towards deaf people and their language

With respect to the third factor, the society hardly perceives the deaf person as bilingual. Unlike other people who deal with two or more languages, the bimodal bilinguals have to struggle with long-held stereotypes about sign language and “pathological” view on deafness. Just like other bilingual minorities, members of the Bulgarian Deaf community tend to associate socially within their own linguistic group and as such, they underestimate their language in favour of the majority language (Grosjean, 1992). Not surprisingly, deaf people in Bulgaria who have good command in Bulgarian language are prone to more connections with hearing people, acknowledgment and higher social position, including within the community of deaf people. The higher status of Bulgarian language can be explained by the hierarchy of social groups in which verbal knowledge is an essential component of a normative behavioural model. If we accept the hearing people as a social group with a higher social status than the “group” of deaf individuals, the interference of traits of the former is explicable, as “[...] the more prestigious group becomes an attractive model for the less

prestigious one [...]“ (Videnov, 1998, p. 23). Literature regarding social functioning of Deaf people contains enough evidence that the same was true for other Deaf communities around the world many years ago (Woodward & Markowicz, 1980).

The majority of organizations worldwide for training and registration of SLI claim that qualification should include general knowledge in the fields of interpreting, ethical decision making and interpreting skills along with well developed communication skills, at least bilingual in the national spoken language and the national sign language. Legally, the professional framework of Bulgarian SLI, including the educational requirements, duties and qualification standards, is defined in an Ordinance No. 48 from 9 January 2012 on the acquisition of the vocational qualification “Interpreter – Sign Language”. Until now, the Union of the Deaf in Bulgaria is the only institution in Bulgaria providing actual certification training for Bulgarian sign language interpreters, as well as maintaining their registration. The history reveals that the organization, established in 1934, full member of the European Union of the Deaf since 2007, claims to promote, support, and assist deaf citizens in the country towards their social and professional integration. In respects to the SL interpreting, UDB has established a National Methodological and Consultative Centre for Bulgarian Sign Language, part of which is the Vocational Training Centre responsible for SLI training and certification. The Centre is engaged in teaching and qualification of SLI as well as preparing teachers how to use sign language at school to support their teaching and learning interactions with deaf students. Contrary to the international initiatives to recognize Deaf communities as linguistic minorities and not disabled category of people, the Union of the Deaf in Bulgaria determine the Signed Bulgarian as the language of Bulgarian Deaf (Bulgarian Union of the Deaf, 2001). Additionally, it should be perceived as a modality of the Bulgarian spoken language. While I cannot claim that all Deaf Bulgarians agree with the statement, actually, there has been a strong in-community dispute about the status of the BGSL, I am convinced that without native deaf signers being involved in the process of deaf empowerment, the change cannot be expected any time soon. Consequently, in interpreters training provided by the Vocational Centre the focus is primarily on “transliteration” skills, not on the development of communicative competence in BGSL. For that reason, there is only one category curriculum covered – Vocabulary (Lexicon). Cultural awareness and Grammar are not considered essential (Mosheva, 2015). Actually, the existence of grammar is denied.

Bulgarian Sign Language interpreter training

Methodologically, “translation method” is applied resulting in good word-to-sign production skills learned. Sadly to note, teaching BGS� to both interpreters and teachers follow the same aims and objectives, based on the same curriculum guide with little organizational difference in the learning process. Language learning and teaching curriculum use a linear approach – “a series of objectives which, once they are mastered in a given course, are never dealt with in that course again or, never dealt with specifically in more advanced courses” (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1980, p.144). Also the trainings are set more like a skill-based course for “transliteration” than knowledge-based one. Philosophy frames, cross-cultural mediation, the code of ethics, and interpreting techniques are not included as major areas in the educational content although required by the law. The Vocational Training Centre does not offer certification maintenance programs or hands-on trainings to help sign language interpreters advance their careers. The Association of the Bulgarian Sign Language Interpreters also offers little if any help to sign language interpreters. The Association’s official language strategy generally corresponds to the policy led by the Union for the Deaf in Bulgaria. There are educational interpreters and support workers at Universities in Sofia and Plovdiv provided on a project-based principle by the Association of Parents of Children with Hearing Loss.

It is fair to mention that there are course-based practices in teaching BGS� as a second language to hearing learners applying communicative approach (Lozanova & Dimitrova, 2004). The selection of vocabulary follows thematically organized schema taught in meaningful context, not learned in isolation. In order to avoid possible confusion of Bulgarian and BGS�, production and understanding in sign language is voiceless and learners are not expected to express themselves in sign language until they develop good receptive skills in BGS�. Cultural awareness and certain grammatical features are included in the learning content (Lozanova, 2006). Given the fact that communicating in a language and interpreting in that language are different skills, presented information might be considered important mostly because it demonstrates existence of practices focused on the natural BGS� recognition.

Furthermore on the subject of Bulgaria, there are few full-time working interpreters and none employed by schools. National regulations and educational institutions do not have a policy and guidelines outlining the role and responsibilities of the SLI in the educational system. The Individual Educational Plan defining the inclusive accommodations and modifications to meet student's needs does not specify sign language interpreter's roles although it does not deny such. Deaf and hard-of-hearing children are left without interpreting services at mainstream schools. It is not clear what would be the required professional skills based upon the school settings the interpreter will work in.

Conclusion

The two types of interpretation, namely Bulgarian Sign Language interpretation and transliteration, are used to make spoken Bulgarian language accessible to deaf people. Sign language interpreting is a complex task and requires skills to understand deaf bimodal bilinguals who can move between various points on the language mode continuum and use Bulgarian-based signing, or BGSL, depending on the situation and the language competency and skills of the participants.

All things considered above clearly show that sign language interpreting in Bulgaria is still in its developmental stage. Although we are certain that Bulgarian Sign Language is a "real" language, we lack deep knowledge of its linguistic structure in order to implement it in interpreter training programs as a target or/and a source language. A lack of both theoretical and practical research in this area, very limited description of actual practice, and mostly the discrepancy in the opinion and positions about the nature of BGSL indicate the need for fundamental knowledge in the field. Equally important is educational interpreting, which also needs professional attention and scientific research to define its role in inclusive education in general and more precisely with regard to the needs of the deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

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