

## Professional recognition for Deaf interpreters in the UK

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This paper will document some of the history of Deaf interpreters (DIs) in the UK, with examples given of Deaf people working as translators and interpreters since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Then the recent process leading towards professional recognition and registration with NRCPD<sup>1</sup>, the Deaf Interpreter Consortium and its work to ensure DIs can register on a par with their hearing colleagues will be described. The article concludes by showing how the varied traditional work of DIs has been codified into the current registration system and national standards.

### A brief history of DIs

Prior to 2007, Deaf people have often worked as interpreters, translators and language brokers in the community, without any protection or rights to remuneration. Although Deaf people have been undertaking this work in a variety of situations, to date there has only been partial recognition of their valuable work (see Collins and Walker, 2006). Deaf people have been able to attain sign language qualifications at a professional level, such as the original Stage III exam (1982 – 1987), which included some interpreting and translation. At that time, this qualification enabled some DIs to register as partial professionals (registered trainee interpreters), although there was no route for progression to full professional status (Denmark, 2007).

With no route to qualification, the labelling of DIs as ‘relays’ rather than interpreters continued; relaying being something that all interpreters may experience when working. This occurs when one works or relays from an interpreter rather than the source language, and is something we see regularly in the EU and UN. As such in the situation where a hearing sign language interpreter is working with a Deaf sign language interpreter both relay from each other. This forced segregation continued a

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<sup>1</sup> The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind people

perceived status difference between ‘hearing’ interpreters and DIs. With no further developments from CACDP<sup>2</sup> at that time, DIs found themselves in stasis.

One of the problems DIs faced was the lack of knowledge or understanding of their position historically within the Deaf community and its interface with wider society. The first example we can find of a Deaf person rendering sign language to English appears to be that of Matthew Pratt, the husband of Sarah Pratt. Matthew took down a written account of his wife’s experiences that she signed in an examination by the Puritan Church. Matthew acted alongside Sarah’s hearing sisters during this church examination, around 1680 in Weymouth, Massachusetts (Carty, Macready and Sayers, 2009: 309). Interestingly, this also appears to be the earliest record we have of ‘hearing’ people working as interpreters, and so the first example we have of interpreting between Deaf and hearing people actually includes a DI and two interpreters working together; the DI working into written English and the interpreters into spoken English.

By the 18th century, we start to have accounts of Deaf people within the legal system (see Stone and Woll, 2008) and then in 1817 in Glasgow, a ‘Deaf aide’ was used in the trial of Jean Campbell, when the headmaster of Edinburgh Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Robert Kinniburgh, was unable to understand and be understood (Hay, 2008). From 1928 onwards we begin to have both Deaf and hearing people qualifying under DWEB<sup>3</sup> as welfare workers with this qualification, which included interpreting alongside other skills tested, and interpreting was an expectation of the welfare workers role until the mid 1970s (see Simpson 2007).

Back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The Deaf Interpreter Consortium was formed in 2007 (Signature, 2010), with representation from interested parties wishing to create routes to registration for DIs. Seeking to build on previous work by ASLI’s Deaf Interpreters’ Network (DIN), the DI Consortium had the following membership:

- Christopher Stone, ASLI

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<sup>2</sup> Now called Signature and the body responsible for sign language and interpreting qualifications within the UK.

<sup>3</sup> Deaf Welfare Examination Board

- Helga McGilp, SASLI
- Clark Denmark, UCLan
- Judith Collins, University of Durham
- John Walker, University of Sussex
- Anne-Marie Graham, CiLT
- Trudy Field, NRCPD
- Jim Edwards, Cathy Barnes, Paul Parsons, Signature

It had become apparent that “the new breed of Deaf interpreters [were] currently paraprofessional due to the lack of qualification routes and regulation” (Collins and Walker, 2006: 20). Furthermore, although the historic role of interpreters was becoming more well-known (Stone, 2009), there was still a critical need to have a theoretical model of the deaf interpreting process, which is consequently used in training (Forestal, 2005). Although there had been previous publications regarding the use of DIs in the US (Bienvenu and Colonomos, 1990), they tended to only focus on intralingual work and downplay other aspects of DIs work.

Finally in 2005, Boudreault, a Canadian DI who regularly worked between ASL and LSQ, as well as other DI work, published a book chapter detailing the complexity of the Deaf interpreter’s role in different contexts (Boudreault, 2005). This, coupled with the explicit description of interpreting within the NOSI<sup>4</sup> as “the process where one spoken or signed language is transferred into another spoken or signed language” (CiLT, 2006: 11), brought about further momentum to change the status quo. At the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of SASLI in 2007 a workshop was dedicated to DIs, with contributions from Clark Denmark, John Walker/Judith Collins, Lorna Allsop/Christopher Stone and Robert Adam/Breda Carty/Christopher Stone. Here we saw the hegemony of ‘hearing’ trained and registered ‘BSL/English’ interpreters challenged by the aforementioned contributors.

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<sup>4</sup> National Occupational Standards in Interpreting

A new goal

The DI consortium wanted to capitalise on the emerging evidence and political will to support DIs' training and registration. Our aim was to enable practitioners in these fields to attain formal recognition as professionals on an equal footing with practitioners who are already able to register. Previous work undertaken by the DI consortium had identified three clear areas of DI work that required action:

- Action 1 - two-way interpreting between two sign languages
- Action 2 - one way translation/interpreting English text to BSL
- Action 3 - intra-lingual modification

This required us to identify the role within each area, the relevant occupational standards, the relevant qualifications needed and the route to NRCPD registration.

*Action 1 – two-way interpreting between two sign languages*

Here the role of the DI is the same as that codified in the NOSI. Signature awards two language qualifications for sign languages indigenous to the UK (BSL and ISL), and there is demand not only for BSL/ISL interpreting but also other sign languages such as ASL. As of the year 2011, the new interpreting qualification has been accredited to the QCF<sup>5</sup> and is available as the Signature Level 6 Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting (INT6). The DI consortium has been influential in the design of the qualification to ensure that DIs are given an equal opportunity to become qualified, and gain a route to registration.

The INT 6 qualification covers all combinations of languages where one is native/indigenous (to the UK) and is no longer simply BSL and spoken English. Candidates must demonstrate fluency and full modality in the two languages. In the case of English for example, to gain the qualification the interpreter must demonstrate competence in reading, writing, listening and speaking. This new diploma opens up the possibility for sign language to sign language interpreting. Consequently, Deaf people can take INT 6 if they are fluent in at least one sign language native to the UK and another sign language. The qualification is accepted by NRCPD as conferring eligibility to register as MRSLI<sup>6</sup> (as long as candidates meet other entry criteria). As

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<sup>5</sup> Qualifications and Credit Framework

<sup>6</sup> Member of the Register of Sign Language Interpreters

of July 2011, ten DI candidates are collecting evidence to gain INT 6 and are looking to be registered by January 2012.

*Action 2 – one-way translation/interpreting English text to BSL*

Here the role of the Deaf translator (DT) includes rehearsed translation and live sight translation (or sight interpreting, see Rathmann, 2011), and although this forms part of the traditional role of the DI (see Stone, 2009) this does not neatly fit into the NOSI. ASLI's DIN, employers such as RedBee media and Remark!, as well as other professionals in the field (including Clara Allardyce, Lesley McGilp, Ann Goldfinch, Robert Adam and Christopher Stone), have worked with Signature to develop a proposed qualification. This qualification is based on aspects of the NOSI and the NOST<sup>7</sup>. Signature has developed a qualification, the Signature Level 6 Diploma in Sign Language Translation (TRAN6). The qualification is accepted by NRCPD as conferring eligibility to register as RSLT<sup>8</sup> (as long as candidates meet other entry criteria). As of July 2011, 16 DT candidates are collecting evidence to gain TRAN6 and are looking to be registered by January 2012.

*Action 3 – intra-lingual modification*

As noted above, one of the issues facing the DI consortium has been codifying the traditional roles of DIs within the UK qualifications framework. Although DIs have traditionally undertaken interpreting, translation and language brokering work (and there is evidence that spoken and sign language interpreters also engage in a broader spectrum of work than their qualifications evaluate – see CiLT, 2009: 5), these do not neatly fit into current national qualifications and/or occupational standards.

The intra-lingual modification includes: working from BSL to modified BSL, visual frame, hands-on, register adaptation, etc., and even International Sign. Signature has undertaken an auditing exercise, with many different roles being identified with no single underlying skill set. The publication of National Occupational Standards in Intercultural Working by CiLT could open up new opportunities for those DIs who only undertake this type of work. Signature contributed to consultations led by CiLT – the National Centre for Languages, a UK Standards Setting Organisation, to make sure the roles and skills of those who work in

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<sup>7</sup> National Occupational Standards in Translation

<sup>8</sup> Registered Sign Language Translator

one signed language are accurately reflected in the research on the use of inter-language and intercultural skills. Even with this support it is highly unlikely that any qualifications would be considered for International Sign as this is not a language, but rather a situational pidgin with no standard form and it is not indigenous to the UK.

## Conclusion

Although it has not been an easy journey, with much debate along the way, the DI consortium has been able to support Signature in achieving qualifications with associated occupational standards for DIs either as interpreters between two sign languages, or sight translators/interpreters working from English text (static or scrolling) to BSL. Whilst not covering all of the aspects of DIs' work, we have been able to ensure consistency with other qualifications within the UK. Ideally, it may be possible for those DIs with INT6 to take further modules in Deafblind interpreting (along with hearing interpreters potentially) and language modification so that all aspects of the DI's historic role are addressed. While not perfect these moves have brought about the long overdue recognition of the work DIs undertake on a professional basis, and should place them on an equal footing with their hearing colleagues. We hope this will allow for increasing professional standards, better quality assurance and greater collaboration between Deaf and hearing professionals in the future.

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