

The Sign Language Interpreter in the Pandemic Context: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study explores the situation of Sign Language interpreters in Romania during the Covid-19 pandemic from a pragmatic perspective. After a theoretic framework about Sign Language interpreting and competences of the interpreters, we described the data of our investigation. Results of the study indicate changes in Sign Language practice during Covid-19 pandemic, opportunities and challenges faced by interpreters during this period, interpretation requests, distance work with the sub-themes: platforms used, stressors, home interpretation with difficult aspects and advantages, balance between personal and professional life.

Keywords: Sign Language, interpreter, Covid-19, interpreting process, competencies, challenges

Introduction

Living in a society with increasingly complex information requirements and offers, we notice that inaccessible information undermines the autonomy of the daily lives of Deaf and deafblind people who have Sign Language as their mother tongue. They face great difficulties in accessing information and therefore specific adaptations and the involvement of the Sign Language interpreter are needed to ensure accessibility through the interpretation process. The Sign Language interpreter is the person qualified to practice the profession in various contexts, using simultaneous or consecutive interpretation and the necessary adaptations to facilitate communication.

The interpretation process aims at both the linguistic part and the accuracy of the conversion from one language to another, as well as aspects related to inclusion that materialize when the person feels included at micro and macro level. Interpretation in the case of Deaf people refers to the process of changing messages from a source language to one used by the Deaf or vice versa. Languages can be verbal or signs and the defining feature is the direct and immediate transmission of information. It is also very important to know well the particularities and expectations of the person for whom we interpret and to organize the environment so that there is no interference in the interpreting process. (Tufar, 2013). Errors in facilitating communication can have multiple causes, but they are mainly due to the interpreter's inability to receive, decode and transmit the original message or due to the lack of competence in the use of the target language both by the person expressing the message and by the one to receive it.

Particularities of Sign Language interpretation and interpreters' skills

In the context of Sign Language interpretation, according to Bontempo (2015) there is a rapid evolution with particularities imposed by the professionalization process of interpreters, but also with obvious discrepancies regarding the status of Sign Language, which is still developing in some parts of the world. Starting from the definition of Sign Language as a visual language, we can mention that: Sign Language evolves naturally in the communities of deaf people, they have their own specific grammar and lexicon, it is not a gestural replica of the spoken language. Sign Languages are not universal, they are real languages with a complete set of linguistic structures, complex and extremely nuanced, and they are as sophisticated as naturally spoken languages.

The three important steps in the interpretation process (cf. Andronic, Tufar, 2020) are: understanding, conversion and presentation. The agreement refers to the interpreter's ability to perceive the original message, deep knowledge of the language used, the culture of the speaker, the interpreter's training in various areas of education and knowledge of the particularities of the subject. Conversion is the process of decoding the message and integrating the meaning into the presented language; this includes details regarding cognitive processing in the sphere of receptive language, the interpreter's ability to understand, decoding and recoding concepts related to the speaker's metaphors or jokes. The interpreter's presentation must include good control of the voice, signing skills and, in general, good education as a public speaker.

Sign Language interpreters are qualified to interpret Sign Language simultaneously or consecutively and they are professionals whose work requires a lot of attention, specific skills and to function at the appropriate parameters and at the same time to maintain the integrity of the message. The interpreter must possess a lot of skills learned during the training program and then consolidated in the daily experiences. There are several categories of skills that interpreters need to present, but according to Tufar (2013) they can be reduced to language skills and interpersonal skills.

Language competencies

Interpreters must have excellent bilingual Sign Language skills, including regional variants and many means of processing verbal language in a sign code. They need to be flexible in the way they interpret to suit people of different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, educational and social levels. They must adapt to conditions such as: noticing subtle nuances in governmental or diplomatic conferences, technical precision in academic circles, elegance and aesthetics in theatrical or literary circles. It takes humor or reservation, as conditions dictate (Pöchhacker, 2004). Interpreters need a thorough knowledge of verbal and written language, requiring quick access to terms from specialized vocabularies and the ability to understand many regional or foreign accents. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, new signs were introduced in the active vocabulary, such as: coronavirus, isolation, immunization, quarantine, contagious and interpreters have the duty to understand very well the concepts represented in order to accurately interpret the message. The verbal language of the performers should not be too pronounced, and their verbal presentation should avoid monotony or poor quality. Effective interpretation requires the interpreter to restructure the information according to the person to whom it is addressed, and the lack of efficiency is related to three factors: the inability of the interpreter to analyze the received message in sufficient depth, the inadequate choice of target language and lack of competence. grammar and lexicon of the target language.

Voice-to-speech interpretation requires a combination of the interpreter's skills mentioned above. It occurs in situations where deaf people are online or in a group, but do not see each other. Interpreters are required to be able to receive a message in signs and interpret it simultaneously in verbal language while signing the same message. This task is particularly demanding. When one of the hearing impaired people makes a comment without using their voice, the interpreter is forced to use the voice in translation for the benefit of the deaf who do not know the signs, while repeating the message in gestures for the deaf who cannot see. If two or more performers work in a team, then one can deal with voice interpretation, while the other focuses on interpreting gestures. In this way none of the performers is overworked, and the team approach can be really effective. It is recommended that there be breaks for the performers to rest after about 30 minutes of activity.

Interpersonal competencies

Cokely (2005) describes the Sign Language interpreter from the perspective of personal and interpersonal skills, as a person who has a moral character and honest, conscientious, trustworthy and emotionally mature. In addition to these necessary conditions, we also mention that the interpreter must quickly analyze a new situation that may arise in his task, to intuit how the participants will interact and then be sure that each participant is familiar with how the interpreter acts. He must notice when the speaker is nearing the end of the message or when he is only pausing, but also to know the rules of both forms of language.

The interpreter can be likened to a "traffic conductor", and his disruption can have undesirable consequences. He cannot be interrupted by questions or disturbed by appreciation. He must "read" carefully the speaker and judge the intentions of those who gesture in order to know how to facilitate the interaction. If the interaction is long-lasting, there may be times when the interpreter shares his or her experiences or expertise.

Interpreters need breaks to meet their personal needs and comfortable conditions to be able to help others. Interpreters must be familiar with the culture of people with hearing impairments, but also with that of listeners. The interpreter is expected to make an interpretation at the intersection of the boundaries of cultural differences. For example, a word or phrase that may have a positive connotation for a person with a hearing impairment may have no meaning to a listener.

After studying the correlations between several factors involved in interpretation, Schein & Stewart (2002) mention that a successful performer is desirable to be independent, not to be fearful, not to be rigid and not to seek sympathy for himself. In addition to intelligence, adequate personality and strong motivation, the interpreter must have motor skills to correctly achieve sign language.

Personal training is a necessary part of the professional task for all interpreters. They may request in advance some of the following data: written materials; the agenda (which is very important), the list with the names of the participants. They may also request a meeting in advance with people with hearing impairments and other speakers to discuss what will be presented or what will be discussed. Preparation time may be different for each task, however, this process is necessary, and sometimes you may feel the need for additional preparation time due to the complexity of the topic or the audience that may require specific adaptations if it also includes people with deafblindness. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the safety

measures that must be respected and that determine additional preparation time have also appeared. In addition, there are requests for digital skills to be able to carry out online interpretation.

In essence, the competencies of Sign Language interpreters, whether linguistic or interpersonal, are at the congruence between performance standards and their qualifications in respect to the code of ethics.

De Wit & Sluis (2014) studied the skills of sign language interpreters from the perspective of Deaf users concluded that they select an interpreter based on situational factors, the professional and personal skills of the interpreter. The choice of a particular interpreter is based on a set of individual quality criteria. The results of the study indicate that the Deaf seek primarily to choose an interpreter who renders a faithful interpretation and a high level of understanding. Finally, the study suggests that many Deaf Sign Language users are unfamiliar with the interpreter's professional requirements and also many interpreters are unfamiliar with Deaf users' expectations.

The study

The purpose of this study was to investigate issues related to Sign Language interpreters between February 2020 and January 2021 and we were interested in highlighting particularities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The questions of the study focused on aspects related to the experience as a sign language interpreter in a pandemic context, challenges / obstacles or opportunities that arose, aspects related to online interpretation from the platforms used to advantages and disadvantages of it.

Participants

This study involved 16 active interpreters during the study period, 62% women and 38% men, with an average age between 40-45 years, most with experience in interpreting over 10 years, 94% being graduates of higher education and 75 % being authorized interpreters. The cities where they interpret are Bucharest, Botoșani, Cluj-Napoca, Focșani, Iasi, Miercurea Ciuc and Ploiești.

The participants completed an online survey created by the authors of this paper, but in advance the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, duration of completing the survey and the right to withdraw or interrupt the procedure if they wish. It was mentioned that the answers to the questions are used for research purposes and are not subject to moral, value or fairness judgments.

Data analysis

For the processing of the resulting data, the thematic qualitative analysis was used, which represents a coherent way of organizing and decrypting some materials, by referring to the specific questions of the undertaken research. This analysis ensures the identification of recurring themes that appear in the individual conceptualizations of a phenomenon and maintains a certain level of internal coherence in revealing the meanings of the phenomenon. The initial analysis was followed by the analysis aimed at reducing the data so as to allow further analysis

and interpretation and the identification of emerging themes. The identified themes synthesize the peculiarities of interpretation in a pandemic context.

The coding scheme contains four general themes: changes in the activity of the interpreter, opportunities and obstacles faced by interpreters during the pandemic, interpretation requests, distance work with the sub-themes: platforms used, stressors, difficult interpretation at home and benefits, the balance between personal and professional life. In the next part we will present them compared to the data obtained by De Meulder, Pouliot and Gebruers (2021) through an international study involving 2634 interpreters from 63 countries.

The theme changes in the activity of interpreter

In order to identify whether there have been changes in the activity of a sign language interpreter in the pandemic, the survey contains a section on how the interpreter acted during the state of emergency. To this question the respondent had the opportunity to select multiple answers from those given. Thus, according to the answers provided, 31.25% of the respondents worked online, 3.12% did not work at all, 34.3% worked respecting the restrictions imposed in that period, 3.1% postponed all possible commitments, in while 28.12% worked face to face taking all the risks.

Comparing the results of the De Meulder, Pouliot and Gebruers (2021) in the research report "Remote sign language interpreting in times of Covid-19" conducted at the University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht 27.57% activated 100% online and only 5.5% worked face-to-face. In this study, however, there is a drastic decrease in requests for interpretation in sign language. If in the last 6 months of 2019 52.3% of the surveyed interpreters worked on average 5 days a week, during the state of emergency only 19% of respondents worked at the same work schedule while 15.6% worked less one day a week.

In many fields of activity, remote work has been and is a novelty with specific implications and challenges. Sign language interpreters, like many, have been put in the situation to access this new way of carrying out their professional activity. Following the questionnaire, it was wanted to identify the experience of remote work of interpreters before the Covid 19 crisis, respectively how many of those surveyed received guidance on how to interpret remotely. In this regard, to the question "Have you interpreted online before the health crisis caused by Covid-19?", The results reveal that only 18.75% of respondents worked constantly as a remote interpreter, 31.25% did not interpret under this form never while 50% worked only occasionally. Regarding guidance or training on how to perform sign language interpreting activities online, only 31.25% answered in the affirmative, while the remaining 68, 75% worked remotely without any guidance or any form of training in this sense.

This trend, which indicates less experience with working from home before the pandemic and poor training on how to interpret remotely, also emerges from De Meulder, Pouliot and Gebruers (2021) who showed that 80% of those surveyed have never worked remotely in the last 6 months of 2019, respectively 63% worked during the academy as interpreters without prior training.

The theme: obstacles and opportunities that interpreters faced during the pandemic

The results of the question on the obstacles encountered during the state of emergency in the activity of interpreter showed that the most common obstacle was that of wearing a mask: about 30%, followed by steaming and the poor speed of the internet connection: 19.1% of the participants and 17% of the interpreters stated the communication difficulties as obstacles. In

this section we also left open-ended questions, obtaining the following answers as obstacles: *“Canceling one's own safety for the benefit of members of the Deaf community”, “Online and face-to-face interpretation with the mask. At first it was difficult ... But I adapted to this situation well”, “Limiting communication and taking the risk associated with the pandemic”, “Making a living!”, “Let's stay positive ... with a good psyche”, “Taking the risk of infection when I had to give up the adapted mask because it was not effective; rapid adaptation to using platforms”, “To interpret using the protective mask, which makes communication difficult in LSR”, “Internet speed that shakes the transmission-reception fluid interpretation”, “Wearing masks, the situation of elderly Deaf people who are dependent of information during the ANSR meetings”*

The international study shows that the main obstacle regarding the remote activity in the field of Sign Language interpretation during the pandemic period was the technical one, the lack of adequate space or equipment, the presence of family members in the room or pets, noisy environment, lack of dedicated space with the possibility of isolation. Customers' poor knowledge of the use of platforms and the limitations of online platforms that are not designed for sign language communication and interpretation have been among the major difficulties.

The opportunities identified by the participants were: *“Visibility in the media”, “The opportunity to interpret online more than we do before”, “Video translations of texts written in the natural language of the signs”, “I'm glad that students with hearing impairments have the opportunity to access an IT program designed especially for them”, “A wider visibility at the level of the wider society (of the hearing majority) - a better recognition of the need for the interpreter”*.

During the state of emergency (March-May 2020), study participants stated that they had discovered the following issues: *“Deaf people have been particularly frightened and isolated”, “Translations of texts written in Sign Language by native Deaf people as an authorized interpreter are needed”, “Lack of requests from state institutions!”, “I am the only interpreter in Vrancea County and I could not refuse any case. I hope that the competent factors will take measures to increase the number of interpreters”, “The biggest challenge was the interpretation of the IT initiation program “Book of Dalia”, a program for Deaf students. The interpretation had to be done on meet, the speed of the net prevented the transmission. Another challenge was the interpretation of the subjects of the test models for the preparation of the national exams for the students of our school during the lockdown period, during which the ministry posted weekly training models”*.

Theme requests for interpretation during the Covid-19 period

Question 13 of the survey concerns the workload or the number of requests. 37.5% of the Romanian interpreters surveyed registered a decrease in requests, while only 18.75% registered an increase in these requests. There were also interpreters who had no requests during all this time, representing 12.5% of respondents.

The results of the international research show that a large part of the interpreters either registered a drastic decrease in the volume of requests (an average of 70%), or reported that they lost all their commitments as an interpreter, regardless of whether we work from a distance or face. ahead (33% in April 2020 and 15% in July 2020).

The fields or situations in which they worked as interpreters during the period taken into account in this study are as follows: worked online: 21.3%, in public institutions: 14.7%, in the judiciary field: 13.1%, in the health system: 11.4%; in the educational context or in relation to

the police: 9.8% of interpreters were active. A number of 13.1% were asked to interpret in situations that do not cover the options given in the survey.

At the international level, the fields in which interpreters worked during the first survey (April 1-3) were in order: education, business / employment, medical system, government and social services. During the application of the third questionnaire, the one in July 2020, the fields were as follows: education, business / job, web conferences / seminars, medical / physical health and community interpretation. This last questionnaire contained additional questions that highlighted the fact that in the field of education, most activities took place in the university environment, followed by secondary school and then elementary school. It is noteworthy that in mid-April 2020, of those remaining with commitments as performers, 52% worked on the spot. More than half of them believe that this is due to the fact that they are considered essential workers working in the field of health, media, public services, etc.

The theme of *distance work includes as a first sub-theme online platforms* used due to the visual nature of sign language interpretation.

The professional activities carried out through the method of remote work could be achieved following the use of online platforms. Item with no. 16 aims to identify the platforms used by interpreters during the state of emergency. The item allows the selection of multiple answers. The results are as follows: the most accessed platform was the Whatsapp platform in a percentage of 28.26%, followed by Zoom: 21.7% and then Voci pentru mâini platform: 10.8%. In addition to these three platforms, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Webex and other platforms were also accessed. This trend was maintained in the respondents of the international study where on the first two places are the same two platforms, respectively Zoom and Skype. At the time of the first stage of the study, Zoom leads detachedly, the WhatsApp platform being introduced as an option only in the second questionnaire. It is noteworthy that WhatsApp, despite the fact that it is not known as a video conferencing platform, the video function being only on the phone, was the third most used tool. The Microsoft Teams platform was less used and was perceived as more difficult to use. This could be due to the fact that it did not have the option to appoint more than three people until May 2020.

A second sub-topic concerns *stressors* and starting with the question “Is online interpretation more stressful than direct interpretation?” 33% of respondents reported that yes, it is more stressful and 67% said it depends on the context. Among the stressors noticed first were: technical aspects, fluctuating internet connection and poor resolution of the video transmission.

The third sub-theme regarding *home interpretation with difficult aspects and advantages* was outlined by the open answers that the study participants gave. Thus, the difficult aspects are as follows: “*Setting the neutral frame in the back, technical aspects*”, “*Poor quality technological materials - better quality involves additional costs*”, “*Internet connection*”, “*Lack of synchronization*”, “*Repetition, for a clearer feature of the message*”, “*Difficulties in making eye contact*”, “*Connection and lack of immediate feedback of interlocutors*”, “*lack of a space specially arranged for interpretation, inside the house (including proper lighting, appropriate background)*”. The following were identified as advantages: “*Elimination of geographical limits*”, “*Exposure limitation*”, “*Prompt response to requests!*”, “*Sure. It's more comfortable at home.*”, “*Yes, the actual time for training*” “*Speed of intervention, psychological comfort*”

The fourth sub-theme: the balance between personal and professional life was defined by the respondents' answers as follows: 44% said yes, they managed to keep a balance between personal and professional life, 13% failed, 31% in most cases managed to keep the balance and 13% in some cases did not keep the balance.

Conclusions

The results of our investigation showed that in the pandemic period February 2020 - January 2021 there were significant changes in the Sign Language interpreters activity from decreased and limited requests for interpretation to particularities related to online interpretation. The opportunities and obstacles faced by interpreters during the pandemic period were on the one hand subjective and on the other hand particularly important in carrying out the activity, challenges appearing primarily in terms of technical aspects, devices, platforms and connection to the Internet. The perceived obstacles generated an amplification of the elements recognized as stressors: inadequate environment; lack of specific tools to online activity on both sides, respectively beneficiary and interpreter; lack of guidelines, recommendations or professional feedback on the specificity of the online activity. In the end we described a very important topic: remote work with the sub-themes of the platform used, stressors, interpreting at home with difficult aspects and advantages, the balance between personal and professional life when remote interpreting.

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