Sign language interpreter: A graduate profession

Changes made to the education of the hearing-impaired have expanded work opportunities and led to an explosion in the demand for qualified sign language interpreters.

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Sign Language Interpretation (SLI) is a relatively new profession in Germany, where it officially became established around the mid 1980s. The use of SLIs means that deaf people now have access to a number of areas previously closed to them.

Changes made to the education of the hearing-impaired (the usefulness of teaching sign language in schools for the deaf is still under debate in Germany) as well as changes in legislation (official recognition since 2002 of German sign language as a fully-fledged language) have expanded work opportunities for SLIs and led to an explosion in the demand for qualified SLIs. This trend has been mirrored by the setting up of various SL training courses since the 1990s.

Just as for our usual (spoken) working languages, sign language interpretation is performed either simultaneously or consecutively. German sign language (DGS = Deutsche Gebärdensprache) is used for communication between deaf and hearing people. Its grammar is different from that of German. There are in addition two other forms of SLI:

- transliteration, i.e. signing as an accompaniment to spoken language. This form of interpretation is used for the hard of hearing or for individuals who have lost their hearing late in life. The sentences are transcribed, with the syntax and grammar remaining the same. The interpreter does not transfer the message from one language to another but reproduces the words spoken verbally in the form of signs, keeping the time lag as short as possible.
- deaf and dumb alphabet: this is a system of tactile communication. The interpreter uses his/her finger to draw the signs corresponding to letters of the alphabet in the palm of the deaf and dumb person.

International sign language, for its part, is another form of communication used between hearing-impaired people from different countries; it is not a language system in the true sense.

The German association of sign language interpreters (Bundesverband der Gebärdensprachdolmetscher - BGSD) held its first congress, entitled “Sign language interpreter - a graduate profession” in November 2003. Discussion revolved mainly around SLI training (curricula and examinations) and quality in the profession. The BGSD is also hoping to develop exchanges and co-operation with other associations and institutions. That is why representatives from the BDÜ (German association of interpreters and translators), the University of Graz and AIIC were invited along to make presentations.
Mr Pöhler, president of the BGSD, opened the congress with a brief historical overview of the association and the development of the profession. German sign language interpreters banded together in the late 1980s with a view to organising vocational training and a diploma in SLI. At that time there were 80,000 deaf people in Germany and only 390 SLIs (18 of them staff interpreters). Each hearing-impaired person drew on the services of an SLI for less than one hour per year. The first university course was established in Hamburg in 1993. Today this training, which leads to a diploma in sign language interpretation, is likewise offered in Magdeburg and in Zwickau. Other courses, leading to a qualification after two years, are also available for practising interpreters without a university background. The first national meeting of SLIs took place in 1995, and in 1997 the Hanover Decree set out the profile of the profession (working conditions, training requirements and recommended pay for SLIs). In March 2002 the BGSD adopted a text defining the profession of SLI (the code of ethics and the skills demanded are very similar to AIIC requirements). The association currently consists of 280 members in 14 Länder, meaning that over 50% of all SLIs belong to it.[2]

The director of the FHTW (Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft - a higher education establishment in Berlin specialising in technical and business studies) spoke next, raising the possibility of establishing an SLI department. Developments in SLI from the perspective of the hearing-impaired were then described by Mrs Gerkens, who among other things welcomed the creation of the “Quality Committee on SLI training and examinations”. Her contribution was followed by a presentation on the etymology and semantic origins of the term “professionalism”. Bianca Schulz, public relations representative for the Germany region of AIIC, presented our association and invited the BGSD to attend our next regional general assembly, to be held in Leipzig in November 2004. Mr Zänker of the BDÜ spoke about court interpreting; Mrs Fischer recounted her personal experience as a deaf person using interpreters, including her difficulty in regarding herself as a “client” and concluding a contract with a SLI. In her opinion, hearing-impaired people still need to adjust to the professional status of SLIs and to be better informed about their rights in such circumstances. Mr Stolz described his positive experiences with SLIs in an educational setting.

The second day was devoted to an exchange of views among SLIs - freelance and staff, beginners and veterans - and to the outcome of work done by the Quality Committee responsible for verifying SLI curricula and examination levels.

It is worth noting that few SLIs in Germany have a sufficient grasp of English to be able to work from it at international conferences. Whereas (overly brief) training courses lasting just a few days are offered in the UK for non English-native SLIs, no English is offered as part of SLI training programmes in Germany in spite of a genuine demand from SLI colleagues. Long-term planning is needed.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that this new branch of interpreting has now become properly established in its own right. Our contacts with SLI colleagues testify to the way in which AIIC is reaching out to ever more groups and shunning isolation.

What is more, since the congress the Germany region has included a link on its website to the BGSD site. A reciprocal link is to be created in the near future.

Abbreviations

- DGS: Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German sign language)
- SLI: Sign Language Interpretation / Sign Language Interpreter
- BDÜ: Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer e. V. (German association of interpreters and translators)
Aude-Valérie Monfort is the Responsible within the German region of AIIC for contact with SLIs. The BGSD groups together the regional SLI associations existing in most of the Länder, but SLIs may alternatively opt to register directly with the BGSD.

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