Gabrielle Hodge* and Della Goswell

Deaf signing diversity and signed language translations

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Abstract: This article explores what deaf signing diversity means for the creation of effective online signed language translations in Australia and for language theory more generally. We draw on the translanguageing and enregisterment literature to describe the communication practices and individual repertoires of deaf Auslan signers, and to problematise the creation of translations from English into Auslan. We also revisit findings from focus group research with deaf audiences and translation practitioners to identify key elements of existing translations that were problematic for many deaf viewers, and to illuminate what makes an act of translation from English into Auslan effective for signers who need these translations the most. One main challenge is the inherent hybridity of signed communication practices, resulting from variable language learning circumstances and other factors. Instead, signed communication practices are often shaped by what we refer to as the *nascency principle*: the perpetual redevelopment of new forms of expression for understanding the specific discourse and spatio-temporal context, by and for the signers who are physically present. This affects possibilities for enregisterment and therefore translations. We conclude with suggestions for improving translations and some broader implications for understanding and researching signed languages.

Keywords: deaf; enregisterment; nascency; sign language; translation

1 Introduction

Signed language translations for deaf audiences have an important role to play in redressing systemic disadvantage, because they provide deaf signers with access to mainstream majority language information as a human right (Leneghan 2007;

***Corresponding author: Gabrielle Hodge**, Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London, 49 Gordon Square, Kings Cross, London WC1H 0PD, UK, E-mail: g.hodge@ucl.ac.uk

Della Goswell, Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, North Ryde, NSW, 2109, Australia, E-mail: della.goswell@mq.edu.au

Stone 2009; see also De Meulder 2015). Over 20 years ago, Steiner (1998) noted the potential for BSL (British Sign Language) interpreting on television to advance deaf people's language and education rights if effective interpretations could be produced. However, he also questioned the extent to which different BSL interpretations could be understood by different deaf signing audiences. This is because deaf educational policies and practices have historically prioritised instruction in speech and majority language orthographies ahead of acquisition of signed languages and instruction in these languages. This has resulted in many deaf people being denied access to robust language learning and knowledge development trajectories. Signed language variation is also motivated by other sociodemographic factors including age, social class, ethnicity, migration and/or geographical location (see e.g. Emery and Iyer 2021; Hill 2017; Quinn 2010; Schembri and Johnston 2013; Schembri et al. 2018). Consequently, signed communication practices are often “hybrid and plural – a mesh of signed languages and visual representations of spoken languages,” even between signers who know each other well (Snoddon 2017: 3).

Here we explore what deaf signing diversity means for the creation of effective signed language translations in Australia and language theory more generally. We draw on the translanguaging and enregisterment literature to describe the communication practices and individual repertoires of deaf Auslan signers, and to problematise the creation of translations from English into Auslan for online formats. We revisit findings from focus group research with deaf audiences and translation practitioners to identify key elements of existing translations that were problematic for many deaf viewers, and to illuminate what makes an act of translation from English into Auslan effective for signers who need these translations the most. We argue that signed communication practices are often shaped by what we refer to as the *nascency principle*: the perpetual redevelopment of new forms of expression for describing and understanding the specific discourse and spatiotemporal context. This affects the development of specialised and standardised registers in Auslan.

2 Auslan networks, deaf communication practices, and individual repertoires

2.1 Communication practices of deaf Auslan signers

Auslan is the most widely used signed language in Australia, evolving from late eighteenth-century BSL (British Sign Language) via deaf immigrants and teachers of the deaf from Britain who established the first deaf schools (Johnston and

Schembri 2007). Auslan has since developed within social networks of deaf signing families, early residential schools for deaf children, and social groups such as religious organisations and state deaf societies (see Schembri et al. 2010; Carty 2018). ISL (Irish Sign Language) was also introduced with the establishment of Catholic deaf schools in Australia, aspects of which remain in use today (see Adam 2017). Other shared (deaf-oriented) and alternate (hearing-oriented) signed languages are also used by deaf and hearing Indigenous Australians¹ (see e.g. Adams and Crowe 2019; Bauer 2014; Green 2014; Green et al., in press; Kendon 1988). Our understanding of how Auslan is used by deaf Indigenous Australians is still unfolding (Ellis et al. 2019).

Conservative estimates put the number of profoundly deaf signers in Australia at 6,500 (Johnston 2004). However, the number of people who use Auslan everyday is much higher. During the 2016 Australian Census, 11,682 people reported Auslan as a language other than English used at home (Deaf Australia 2020). Many deaf people and their families use Auslan, including deaf parents of deaf and hearing children and hearing parents who learn to sign for their deaf children. There are also many hearing people who sign, including family members, friends, colleagues, and other professionals who work with deaf people, such as Teachers of the Deaf and Auslan/English interpreters.

It must be acknowledged that less than 3% of profoundly deaf children are born to deaf signing parents or learn Auslan at a young age from deaf peers at school, and may be regarded as “native” signers who have experienced uninterrupted and intergenerational language acquisition (Johnston 2004). Most deaf signers do not have this experience. Many signers may therefore be described as “new” signers who have experienced a non-traditional pathway to learning a signed language, often much later than childhood (De Meulder 2019).

Another important factor influencing deaf people’s use of signed languages in Australia is geography. Most deaf people tend to live in urban centres close to services that support communication access and social participation, such as deaf societies, with provision of hearing and deaf interpreters, community support workers and educational services. However, deaf people who live in regional or remote areas are more isolated with respect to social networks with other signers and access to communication support services such as Auslan/English interpreting.²

1 We use the term Indigenous to refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. See <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/australias-first-peoples> Accessed 22 February 2021.

2 Skilled Auslan/English interpreters are in high demand across Australia, even more so with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (see Goggin and Wadiwel 2014 for an overview of this scheme). This pressure is greater in regional and remote areas, where there may be only a few interpreters servicing an entire geographical region. For example, the Gippsland region of southeast Victoria covers an area of 41,556 km² in which more than 100 signers reside

As in other minority language networks, deaf signers draw upon various multilingual and multimodal communication practices in their everyday language use (Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Kusters et al. 2017). Indeed, what we understand as “language” (traditionally defined as symbolic, conventionalised, and paradigmatic arrangements for making meaning) is just one of many semiotic resources for communicating (Clark 1996; Enfield 2009). The communicative resources available to individual deaf signers vary widely within specific interactions and across social networks.

When signing with other proficient Auslan signers, deaf signers frequently coordinate conventionalised manual signs with less conventionalised methods of signalling such as indexical actions (e.g. pointing signs), depicting signs (e.g. manual signs that physically resemble how something moves and/or what it looks like) and bodily enactments (Johnston 1989; Liddell 2003; see also Ferrara and Hodge 2018). Proficient use of Auslan also involves making rich and meaningful use of space, for instance when signers direct manual signs and eye gaze towards specific locations in the signing space, such as where a referent has previously been established (Engberg-Pedersen 1993; Johnston 1996). Auslan signers may also incorporate conventionalised signs from other signed languages, especially ASL (American Sign Language).

Auslan signers may also borrow from the ambient English repertoire. Mouthed English words can be fully or partially produced simultaneously with manual signs and/or the fingerspelling of English words and names³. In fact, it is common to see a kind of “double coding” among Auslan signers, whereby some concepts (especially nominal forms) are silently mouthed in English and manually signed in Auslan at the same time (Johnston et al. 2016). Written English is the most visible form of the ambient majority language available to deaf people in Australia,

(Willoughby 2013: 16). However, this region is serviced primarily by a limited number of professional and trainee interpreters working from the outer Melbourne metropolitan area. Not only do interpreters face long drives to get to an assignment, but local government councils often do not provide interpreters for important public events, such as community bushfire preparation meetings.

3 Fingerspelling is one of many communication practices used by Auslan signers. The English alphabet is represented by individual signed letters, so an English word can be literally spelled out with the fingers. Fingerspelling is typically used for proper names and for transliterating English terms that do not have a directly equivalent sign match, or if the signer does not know an equivalent sign match, or if the signer wants to use a specific English word in a specific context (see Deuchar 1977; Sutton-Spence et al. 1990). Thus, fingerspelling may be used both for disambiguation and/or to strategically index English words when signing.

initially via familial and formal educational practices, and more widely in print and digital media such as books, newspapers, online resources, text messages, messenger chat, and open or closed captions on television and film. Deaf signers also use written English with deaf and hearing interactants via text typed into a mobile phone, or other artefacts such as pen and paper (see Johnston and Schembri 2007).

2.2 Auslan and English as translanguaging resources used within semiotic repertoires

Due to the inherent hybridity of many signed communication practices, there is often a quality of unboundedness characterising the Auslan and English strategies used by signers (see Johnston 2003; Snoddon 2017). Auslan and English may often be considered as overlapping resources used in acts of translanguaging, during which signers draw on anything that is useful and available to them while engaging in social action. Various elements of Auslan, English and other languages may be integrated within deaf and hearing signers' communication practices to a greater or lesser degree. The way in which this is done depends on individual competencies with Auslan, written and spoken English, the discourse context and communicative intent, and the other people present.

This paradigm recognises that ideologies of “language separation” or “bounded languages” – stemming primarily from theories of monolingualism – do not do justice to the richly multilingual and multimodal communication practices of speakers (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Grosjean 1985; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015) and signers (e.g. J. Green 2014; Kusters et al. 2017). Instead, individuals may dynamically make use of any semiotic resources at their disposal. The exact manifestation depends on what is available and needed in each specific interaction, along with what is culturally acceptable (Blackledge and Creese 2010; García 2009).

The kinds of resources used represent an individual's communicative repertoire, defined as “the totality of linguistic and communicative possibilities, which are available to speakers [and signers] in specific situational contexts” (Busch 2012: 169). They may be influenced by multiple interacting factors, including identities, emotions, different experiences, power relations, and desires (Busch 2012, 2015; Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012; Spotti 2007). An individual's repertoire reflects their lived experience, so that “different resources not only are differentially accessible, but

also get ascribed different values and get assessed differently in different spaces” (Kusters et al. 2017: 228). For example, a deaf signer’s decision to use a closely English-based transliterated signing practice⁴ with hearing new signers will prompt vastly different value judgements and assessments if used with deaf signers who are proficient with more spatially and visually-motivated Auslan signing.

These concepts are useful for understanding the plurality and power of human communication evidenced across a range of physical and social contexts. For example, translanguaging has been investigated as a pedagogical strategy in deaf and hearing classrooms (e.g. Bagga-Gupta 2000; Lewis et al. 2012; Tapio 2013); as a spontaneous strategy that emerges through the complex discourse practices of bilinguals (e.g. García 2009); between deaf migrants (e.g. Moriarty Harrelson 2019); between people with sensorial asymmetries such as non-speaking deaf and non-signing hearing people (Kusters 2017); in creative collaborations involving deaf and hearing people (e.g. Fagan Robinson 2019; Hodge 2020; Pfeiffer et al. 2020); and in multimodal translation practices (e.g. Murray 2017; Wurm 2018).

However, it is important to note that an individual’s repertoire is as much determined by the resources they do not have, in addition to the resources they do have (Busch 2015: 14). Communication between signers and/or speakers with non-matching repertoires must often be achieved collaboratively by other people with complementary and overlapping skills and resources, who can mediate the interaction. For example, the deaf and hearing signing children of deaf parents, who broker the communication between deaf and hearing adults with non-matching repertoires in family and community settings, as well as the work of accredited interpreters in more formal settings (Kisch 2008; Napier 2017, 2021; Napier and Leeson 2016).

These factors all shape the development of deaf people’s communicative repertoires. Awareness and accommodation of these factors is particularly relevant to the production of English into Auslan translations, whereby translators must determine which aspects of various repertoires can be used effectively in a signed target text or not. In the next section, we outline some key constraints on the development of individual communication repertoires often experienced by deaf signers, then describe how they may respond to these constraints with creativity and communicative resilience.

⁴ Whereby signed English is produced sign-for-word with equivalent Auslan lexical sign matches produced for each English word in English word order, without regard for meaningful use of space and/or less conventional strategies for making meaning (see Power et al. 2008).

2.3 Factors influencing development of individual communication repertoires

Two main factors influencing the language learning circumstances experienced by deaf signers – and consequently the individual communication repertoires and wider knowledge base that develop during individual lifetimes – are family communication practices and deaf education policies. As explained in Section 2.1, the intergenerational transmission of Auslan is heavily constrained by the fact that a very small minority of deaf and hearing children are born to parents who can sign (Johnston 2004). Most deaf children are born to non-signing hearing families, so it is more common for deaf people to learn a signed language from peers at school or later as adults encountering the deaf community, rather than from their primary caregivers. Signed, spoken and written language competencies are often driven by education policy, which further influences the linguistic and therefore learning opportunities available to deaf children, especially those from non-signing families. The following fictional profiles illustrate just three of many different language learning trajectories experienced by deaf signers in Australia:

- i. Colin is a middle-aged deaf tradesman. He was the youngest, and only deaf child in a hearing non-signing family, so his early familial communication was gestural and basic, without speech. Typical for his generation, he was educated at a residential school for the deaf at a time when signed language was misunderstood and forbidden in classrooms. However, he developed Auslan as a primary language from signing deaf peers in the playground and after school. Unfortunately, because of the classroom language barriers, he was denied access to most formal educational content. As with many deaf students his age, he did not complete high school, but went on to learn a manual trade (see Power and Leigh 2000). He has basic English print media literacy and lives with his wife Anna who is also deaf. Their hearing signing children, who often brokered language with them, have now moved out of home. Their television has captions, but they prefer to watch programs that are easy to follow. Colin and Anna communicate with family and deaf friends via short text messages and signed video call conversations. They usually visit their local deaf organisation or ask their children for assistance with important documents they do not understand. Both are fluent Auslan signers and their signing skills are highly regarded by other signers in their community.
- ii. Sarah is a deaf woman in her early twenties born to hearing parents. Her mother learned basic Auslan once she realised her child was deaf. Sarah has a hearing younger sister who developed better signing skills than their mother,

so Sarah had access to both Auslan and English from early childhood. Sarah was enrolled into a bilingual Auslan/English primary school, and later mainstreamed throughout high school with interpreting support. She is now enrolled in a mainstream university program and works with qualified Auslan/English interpreters for her lectures and tutorials. Sarah has excellent English print media literacy, and relies on written communication much more than Colin. She can study online and enjoys captioned theatre performances, but still prefers to socialise mainly with her signing friends. She books Auslan/English interpreters for important face-to-face communication events. Sarah is regarded by others in the community as bilingual in Auslan and written English.

- iii. John is a seventeen-year-old deaf teenager born to hearing parents who were strongly discouraged from signing with him by medical and speech professionals. He was educated in mainstream primary schools with minimal communication support and is now one of two deaf students (in different grades) at the local high school. He still has occasional classes with a visiting Teacher of the Deaf who does not sign fluently, and some assistance from a classroom communication assistant (in this case, an unaccredited language aide who does not have the appropriate signed language skills to effectively interpret the lesson content). He uses hearing aids but his degree of deafness means he is heavily reliant on visual input (e.g. speechreading, gestures) for both one-on-one and group situations. John has struggled with many of his school subjects due to being denied access to formal educational content and consequently English literacy. It is likely he will decide to pursue a vocational trade or find other work when he finishes school. He has recently met a few signing deaf friends via social networks and is rapidly improving his signing skills. However, most of his friends are also new signers from mainstreamed school settings. They all use a more idiosyncratic and English-influenced variety of Auslan developed within their social group, with minimal input from deaf signers who have signed since early childhood. John's communication practices are regarded by older and more proficient signers as impoverished, but they want to support him to gain confidence in signing and to have greater social and employment opportunities.

As these profiles demonstrate, the confluence of variable familial and educational circumstances, along with many other factors such as geographical location and sociohistorical context frequently result in inconsistent “language learning trajectories” (Blommaert and Backus 2013: 7) and signed language use that is extremely heterogeneous (Johnston 2004; Snoddon 2017; see also Hill 2017; Adams and Crowe 2019 on how other compounded systemic oppressions may shape the

experiences and language repertoires of deaf signers). Most deaf children do not have a community of signers around them from a young age and must instead actively seek connections with other deaf signers during or after transition to adulthood. Consequently, the capacity for many deaf people to achieve maximal Auslan and/or English repertoires is often severely compromised. In some cases, deaf children experience language deprivation, with lifelong communicative, social and economic consequences (see Hall 2017; Humphries et al. 2016; Sutton-Spence et al. 1990).

Due to mainstreaming policies and the subsequent reduction in residential signing schools for deaf children and other opportunities for early signed language learning, many signed languages are increasingly influenced by high rates of both deaf and hearing “new” signers (De Meulder 2019). This situation bears some similarities to a subset of migrant speakers who may have “very fragmented and ‘incomplete’ – ‘truncated’ – language repertoires, most of which consists of spoken, vernacular, and accented varieties of different languages, with an overlay of differentially developed literacy skills in one or some languages (depending on the level of literacy at the time of migration)” (Blommaert and Dong 2010: 372). However, hearing migrants typically have familial access to at least one language from their primary caregivers and/or peers, and opportunities to socialise and develop functional English repertoires through school, social networks and/or employment, simply because they can hear⁵.

This is not the case for deaf signers who have been denied access to a primary language during their childhood and/or have otherwise not experienced opportunities to develop maximal Auslan and/or English repertoires (see Ladd 2003: 135–196). In addition to being users of a minority language with no native orthography, deaf signers are also living with a sensory experience that restricts access to aural and incidental information and language usage in the broader community. Many deaf signers consequently experience lifelong “fund of information deficits” (Pollard 1998; see also Fellingner et al. 2012; Pollard and Barnett 2009).

For deaf signers specifically, sensory experience means that mode of communication is also an important factor affecting opportunities for developing English competencies. Many deaf people achieve what can be described as “restricted” literacy competencies resulting from specific “encounters” with English, i.e. “recognition” or “embedded” competencies (Blommaert and Backus 2013: 16). Restricted competencies may include alphabetic scripts for writing and typing in

5 We do not want to invalidate the experiences of hearing asylum seekers here, which are often extreme and harrowing (see e.g. Blommaert 2009). Rather, we strive to understand these different contexts in nuanced terms (see e.g. Sivunen 2019, on the experiences of deaf asylum seekers).

some contexts, such as navigating food menus and text messaging between peers, but exclude print or fingerspelling of English words for other contexts, such as printed or captioned texts of government announcements, use of specialist medical terms, and broadcast news information.

Much of this complexity can be attributed to systemic pressures and entrenched structural inequity, especially those resulting from various hegemonic educational and medical policies that have shaped deaf lives. These factors have limited possibilities for the natural development of “standardised” forms of Auslan across deaf and hearing signers over time. The subsequent heterogeneity of Auslan usage therefore needs to be carefully navigated when translating information from more standardised, majority English language source texts into effective signed target texts for the full range of deaf signing audiences (see also Johnston 2003; Major and Napier 2013).

2.4 Implications of the nascency principle for the evolution of semiotic registers

It is small-scale encounters which particularly shape deaf communication practices (including those developed with non-signers) and individual repertoires, because this is how deaf people most often encounter signed languages (see Bernstein 2003[1971]; Bourdieu 1991). Consider the quantity and variety of immersions in majority spoken and written language contexts typically experienced by hearing, English-speaking Anglo-Australian children at home and school. These children have opportunities to use English in all areas of their life, as their home language often matches their school language. Yet as the three fictional profiles described in Section 2.3 demonstrate, many deaf children only have opportunities to use signing practices – and therefore fully accessible language – in close encounters with other signing children in the playground, but not in the classroom or at home.

Online vlogs and other manifestations of filmed signed content are becoming more common, with some deaf people only accessing signed content online, and specific signs or ways of signing are becoming calqued or relexified (especially via ASL). For example, the “I love you” ILY ASL sign, and various styles of signers who are prolific publishers of signed videos online, including some deaf translators⁶. However, these resources do not share the loud public presence and codification pathways of English, the use of which prevails over time via print, television, radio;

⁶ Although note it is rare to see a signed text online that is not embedded within some majority language format, e.g. most online Auslan resources are visibly framed with English media.

and across many public and institutionalised domains including education, medicine, and the law (see Bennett 2007; Blommaert and Dong 2010)⁷. Consequently, there are less opportunities for codification in Auslan (Johnston 1996) and a comparably more marginalised and tenuous hold in private and public domains (Johnston 2003; Tapio 2014). These factors all influence how deaf people's communicative repertoires and signed languages more generally evolve.

Revisit, for example, the profile of Sarah presented in Section 2.3. She is undertaking a degree in medical science, a specialised topic for which there are only a few conventionalised Auslan signs⁸. Sarah must consequently negotiate and co-construct new forms of signed expression with her interpreters (the only other signers involved in the program) over time, as they jointly learn the concepts and terminology related to medical science. Unless Sarah frequently shares these specialised forms of signing with other deaf signers, or somehow documents them for wider dissemination in a fixed text (e.g. an Auslan vlog) and/or her interpreters have future opportunities to work in this specialist domain with other deaf medical science students, it is likely these new forms will remain transient, rather than conventionalise on a broader scale. When another deaf signer decides to study medical science in the future, they will need to restart the process again, most likely with different interpreters, and without any links back to the ideas and practices generated during Sarah's time. These situations are common and familiar to many signers and interpreters living and working in deaf communities.

Together these factors complicate possibilities for “enregisterment,” i.e. the development of semiotic registers constituting “repertoires of performable semiotic signs” that emerge through specific sociohistorical and interpersonal practices (Agha 2007: 80; see also Agha 2005). During processes of enregisterment, conventional and other semiotic signs associated with specific social groups and communication practices become recognised as indexing these groups, practices, and ideologies. Any given semiotic register is embedded within a “world of diverse registers” which signers and speakers use wholly or partly to “voice person-types, inhabiting and enacting typified roles or simply ventriloquating them for myriad

7 See Eades 2008 for discussion of Indigenous Australian minority languages, the impact of British colonialism, and related experiences of Indigenous speakers of these languages in these contexts.

8 Most deaf signers and some interpreters, for example, rely on integrating less conventionalised strategies of depiction (e.g. semi-improvised manual forms that physically resemble an object) and/or indicating (e.g. pointing to parts of the body) for discussing medical concepts, and for elaborating the meaning of fingerspelled English medical terminology. While depicting signs may potentially conventionalise across community usage over time, they often remain highly context-dependent token forms that rely on conventional framing for appropriate interpretation (Liddell 2003; see also Napier et al. 2011 for discussion of these issues related to medical interpreting).

purposes” (Gal 2015: 230). For example, Steiner (1998) observed that “some [British] deaf peoples’ sign language is most informed by English, others are dominated by the visual/spatial dimension of BSL, and others by circumstance may not have acquired either fluently” (1998: 103). In doing so, he implicitly recognised there is a range of BSL practices that have emerged in British deaf contexts, all of which index specific ideologies associated with different deaf socialities.⁹

The existence of semiotic registers within and across signing networks is not in question: certainly, different groups, practices and ideologies can be recognised and indexed when signing. However, we suggest these often remain at the level of the individual and/or their immediate social groups, i.e. individuals generally sign in similar ways to the signers with whom they spend the most time. In the context of minority languages such as Auslan, the potential for forming second order indexicalities contributing to higher or lower registers or specialist domains of signed language use, for example, often becomes secondary to the “labour of understanding” involved in deaf communication, i.e. the work we do “to make understanding happen” (Friedner 2016: 184; see also Willoughby et al. 2020, on how the constraints and affordances available to deafblind signers may lead to enregisterment of tactile signing practices). Instead, deaf communication practices in many domains are more often shaped by what we refer to as the *nascency principle*: the perpetual redevelopment of new forms of expression for understanding the specific discourse and spatiotemporal context, by and for the signers who are physically present. As explained above, this situation is not an inherent quality of signed language use; rather, it results directly from how majority language hegemonies constrain and shape minority signed language contexts.

When specialised conventional resources have not yet developed and/or are continuously interrupted at both an individual and systemic level, the requirement to continually create new forms of expression essentially negates or puts a break on historical processes that would more generally lead to further language growth and codification into new domains, such as the domain of medical science. The nascency principle as a factor shaping and constraining the evolution of signed languages is nothing new to signers who live and work in deaf signing communities. Indeed, the personal and systemic challenges of signing within majority language hegemonies are well documented (see e.g. Braithwaite 2019, 2020; Kusters, et al. 2020; Sivunen 2019; Snoddon, 2020). However, this factor is not yet explicitly acknowledged and discussed more widely, though it certainly deserves

⁹ Non-signing readers curious about how this can be done may be interested in the BSL sitcom *Small World* produced by BSL Zone: <https://www.bslzone.co.uk/watch/small-world-series-1/>.

more recognition and attention. The effects of the nascency principle are a major challenge for the creation of signed language translations that aim to communicate specialised source content delivered in English registers for which there is not yet any codified Auslan counterpart.

2.5 Locating Auslan in a network of diverse signers

In addition to the realities and challenges outlined above, we would like to highlight some more positive aspects of deaf communication practices and signed language use. The complex interactions of diverse signers across various social networks certainly encourages active participation in what Bakhtin has termed a “living heteroglossia” (1981: 272). That is, participation within semiotically rich, flexible, and varied communicative environments in which different discourses, codes and voices converge. The extensive variation that characterises deaf signing networks contributes to an implicit language ideology whereby many deaf signers can be accommodated by other signers, or adapted to in some way, regardless of their individual repertoires and competencies with Auslan, English and/or other languages. Deaf signers can instead “be reconceptualised as potentially being very adept at languaging in an increasingly diverse world” (De Meulder et al. 2019a: 11).

There are even conventional Auslan signs to refer to this process. The manual sign in Figure 1 refers to the concept of adjusting one’s signing to match the communication style and capacity of one’s interactants via a metaphorical dial (cf. Bell’s (1984) “audience design” whereby speakers adjust their speech to express solidarity or intimacy towards those they are speaking to, or away from them to express distance). Variants of this sign and/or similar metaphors are also used in the United Kingdom, Europe and North America. In addition to what is known about sociolinguistic accommodation effects, the existence and use of such signs,

Figure 1: Conventional sign referring to the process of engaging with diverse signers.

and the metaphors they prompt, both reflects and reinforces an ideology that tolerance for – and flexibility around – signing diversity and varied language competencies is a necessary and respected strength.

This is also evidenced by the presence and value of deaf people with maximal Auslan and English competencies (usually people who learned sign from birth or early childhood) as interpreters/specialist communicators in the field of professional Auslan/English interpreting and translation¹⁰. Their signing fluency and broad, flexible repertoires – along with the lived experience of being deaf – enables these deaf interpreters to better connect with deaf signers whose learning trajectories and language development have been more compromised. This specialist competence is typically due to their total immersion in robust (rather than deprived) multilingual environments from childhood, and their informal yet well-practiced role in mediating a diverse range of interactions in childhood and as deaf adults in the community (see Adam et al. 2011; Stone 2009). This capacity is also known as “deaf extra-linguistic knowledge” and is a prerequisite for working as a deaf interpreter (Adam et al. 2014).

Deaf interpreters and translators can therefore assist in bridging gaps between hearing non-signing people, regular hearing Auslan/English interpreters who have not yet developed the required repertoires, and deaf people with very specific communication needs, e.g. due to childhood language deprivation (Adam et al. 2011; Adam et al. 2014). Indeed, deaf or hearing interpreters from signing deaf families are often viewed as having the greatest amount of cultural capital with respect to communicative competencies, and often enjoy the greatest communicative mobility of all signers.

3 Signed language translations

3.1 Creating signed language translations

As with other translanguaging practices, translations (and the ideologies which drive them) are multifaceted, varied, and complex (Gal 2015). Translation “rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems”

¹⁰ In 2018, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) introduced “recognition” status for deaf interpreters (DI) working across a range of skills areas, including audio-visual translation from English into Auslan. As of 2020, NAATI offers Certified Provisional Deaf Interpreter (CPDI) certification to deaf interpreters working with deaf clients who have “non-conventional sign language” (see NAATI, 2021).

(Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 2). For example, minority language translations are primarily unidirectional, flowing from majority to minority, but rarely vice versa (Cronin 1995). Just as translanguaging practices can be viewed as both a threat to the promotion and protection of minority languages, and an opportunity for their development (Cenoz and Gorter 2017; De Meulder et al. 2019a, 2019b; Snoddon 2017), translation practices and texts may also inadvertently disadvantage some target audiences while providing opportunities for others.¹¹ For example, the preservation of English text on screen in some Auslan translations may threaten comprehension for deaf viewers who have restricted English repertoires; yet strategic use of English fingerspelling may support it.

These factors are all relevant to the creation of signed language translations, whereby spoken or written source texts are translated into signed target texts. A translation is typically a rehearsed version of a static original text in another language, not designed to be delivered at the same time as the original. However, as it is possible to deliver a signed and spoken text simultaneously, signed language translations are often a “hybrid” of interpreting and translation practices. For example, in cases where a translator can analyse the spoken English text prior to filming, but then signs their translation live to a camera or theatre audience as a one-off event (Leneham 2005; Wurm 2014). The target audiences are deaf people who use a signed language. In other words, an audience of people living within perpetually renegotiated and asymmetrical power relations with majority language systems (see Cronin 1995; De Meulder et al. 2019a, 2019b), who have a sensory experience that limits access to auditory information (Bryan and Emery 2014).

In these cases, translators are tasked with reconciling and aligning two vastly different text formats and purposes. Firstly, an existing spoken, written or multi-modal majority language source text that makes use of extensively codified indexicalities entrenched in all domains of private and public life. For example, the bureaucratic and legal practices embedded within some televised government announcements. Secondly, the equivalent minority language target texts being created, presented in a signed language characterised by extensive sociolinguistic and other variation, and with no native orthography (see Section 2). In the next sections, we outline the translations available online to deaf signers in Australia. Data from focus group research is revisited to identify key elements of existing translations that were problematic for many deaf audiences, and to discuss what makes an act of translation from English into Auslan effective for deaf signers with the most restricted repertoires.

¹¹ This conundrum applies to other contexts too, such as the signed language courses offered at some university institutions (see e.g. Robinson and Henner 2018).

4 English into Auslan translations available online

4.1 Defining English into Auslan translations

Although Auslan/English interpreting has been practiced for most of the twentieth century and formally accredited since the 1980s, interpreting outputs have been ephemeral and rarely documented. Possibilities for signed language recording and distribution in more permanent formats such as film and video have only emerged more recently. In the past decade, the English/Auslan translation industry has been developing quickly in response to demand for accessible online information for signing deaf citizens (see Bridge 2009). This has been informed by the access provisions of state and federal anti-discrimination legislation in the 1980s and 1990s, and an increasing public profile for Auslan, such as the recently mandated televised presence of interpreters for natural hazard and health emergency announcements¹².

Since 2014, further international conformance standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) have been adopted in Australia. This has ensured text transcript or captioning of audio content on Commonwealth Government websites. Deaf signers wishing to access information online can typically choose either Auslan-based (via original text, signed contemporaneous interpretations, or translations) or English-based information (original text and transcriptions of spoken English via captions)¹³. Auslan is subsequently becoming more visible in the mainstream media – albeit sporadically – matching a growing commitment from many sectors to provide access for all deaf and hard of hearing Australians on disability access grounds (see Stone 2009 on how this process unfolded earlier in the United Kingdom).

Information in Auslan is primarily disseminated online via: (1) filmed stand-alone Auslan-conceived texts; (2) filmed simultaneous interpretations from English into Auslan (during which spoken English is immediately rendered into Auslan with minimal preparation and lag time, increasing the likelihood of English source text interference and error); and (3) the prepared and filmed translations discussed here. This latter category is commonly used to provide information about deaf community services and events, instructional resources related to everyday life and technology, information about Government services, etc. (see e.g. Figure 2). Such translations constitute “a text-based event which does not occur in real time and is potentially

¹² See Free TV Australia advisory note: <http://auslanemergency.com.au/index.php/broadcasters/>.

¹³ Note that access for deaf and hard of hearing people in Australia has always been sporadic and dependent on the willingness of service providers (especially those beyond the public sector) to meet these obligations.

Figure 2: Audience view of sample translation Safe Driving: Driver Fatigue.

correctable” (Leneham 2005: 81). Translated texts therefore have the potential for greater accuracy, clarity, and naturalness compared to unrehearsed interpretations.

As with the translation of other language pairs, there are generic advantages of translation practices over the immediacy of live interpretation. Not only can information be planned and delivered in a more comprehensive way, with refinement of drafts over time, but deaf signing audiences have more control over how they access this information, e.g. they can pause or rewind a video clip, or watch it multiple times. Translations for deaf Auslan signers can therefore potentially function in a similar way to written or recorded spoken texts for English speakers, with all the associated benefits of being a fixed, immutable and reviewable resource. This is especially useful for very new and/or complex information that may require repeated viewing (see Section 2.4).

Unfortunately, from the perspective of many deaf signing audiences in Australia, the quality of these translations varies widely. The first response was a national investigation into English/Auslan translations available online (Hodge et al. 2015). A manual audit of all English/Auslan translations published online between 2009 and 2014 ($n = 180$, ~88 h of film) found that most translations were produced by organisational stakeholders embedded within the deaf community, particularly the state deaf societies (Hodge et al. 2015: 13). Very few were produced by organisations outside the deaf community. Translations were usually delivered by deaf presenters and typically functioned to disseminate information about deaf community services and events, instructional resources, Government-funded services, organisation newsletters and annual reports, emergency announcements, and health information (Hodge et al. 2015: 15)¹⁴. Most translations were therefore

¹⁴ A small number were delivered by hearing qualified Auslan/English interpreters, but usually only when the source text was a spoken English audio file.

produced by skilled signers embedded within existing signing networks, yet most of whom have not yet experienced opportunities for extensive training in translation practices.

4.2 Main concerns with signed language translations available online

A key finding was that signed translations were often unduly influenced by the sequence, syntax and technical layout of the original English source text, resulting in signed target texts skewed towards English-based transliterations. Several of these texts were singled out as an English transliteration, rendering the signed target text unclear or incoherent. Such texts were more semantically aligned to the English source text, rather than providing the “communicative equivalence” necessary for targeted audience comprehension (see Newmark 1981, 2009). In other words, they reflected an inability to disengage from the English source text form where necessary.

Target texts were constrained by several source text interferences. These included: (1) lexical choices, e.g. choosing manual signs that “correspond” rather than “equate” to specific English words (see Koller 1989); (2) syntax, e.g. manual signs produced in English word order without retaining communicative equivalence; (3) semiotic composition, e.g. the presence of fixed English captions and other print information; and (4) assumed knowledge of some information content, e.g. implicit message content that would usually be made more explicit for deaf audiences. These issues mirror those identified decades earlier by Steiner (1998) regarding BSL interpretations on television.

These interferences and the lack of expansion of some concepts resulted in translations that were conceptually incoherent and therefore much harder to understand for Auslan signers with more restricted English repertoires, who do not have the same general knowledge foundations as hearing non-signers, due to poor educational experiences and resulting “fund of information deficits” (Pollard 1998; see Section 2.3). Coupled with the language use constraints resulting from the nascency principle (Section 2.4), these deaf signers consequently miss out on much of the propositional content presented in the compromised translations, which inadvertently contributes to further disadvantage.

Quantitative analysis of the semiotic resources used in the identified translations confirmed that English text (e.g. open or closed captions) and/or other semiotic information (e.g. moving or still images) were frequently present

alongside Auslan signing, and in various combinations (Hodge et al. 2015: 41).¹⁵ For example, the Safe Driving translations (2012) produced by the Deaf Society of New South Wales and the National Roads and Motorists' Association (NRMA) explains the principles of safe driving, including how to avoid driver fatigue, understand different license restrictions, drink driving, and how to contact the NRMA.

In this set of translations, a deaf presenter uses Auslan to explain how to drive safely, while digital footage of a car being driven plays in the background. However, the signed Auslan text was considered unnatural by deaf audiences, as the ordering and pace of the manual signs was forcibly aligned to the English phrasing of the simultaneous open captions appearing at the bottom of the screen (Figure 2). This misalignment typically happens when a client submits a source text that already contains open English captions and requests that the Auslan target text augments existing video format and timing – and this was the most common format. Indeed, the English source text was often the primary driver of Auslan target text structure, content and signing pace in the audited translations.

Overall, seven semiotic resources were found to be temporally aligned with Auslan signing in these audited texts ($n = 180$): still images (53%), open captions (52%), moving images (13%), spoken English voice-over (12%), English text floating on-screen (10%), and closed captions (2%). Very few texts (8%) had only Auslan signing (Hodge et al. 2015: 17). Thus, approximately half of the audited translations were presented with English text simultaneously on screen. Most translations contained semiotic information in addition to Auslan signing, and these additional resources varied in how they enhanced or detracted from translation clarity. While English source texts may also contain multiple semiotic elements (e.g. spoken and printed English, graphic images, sound effects, open captions), these are typically more congruent and enhance – rather than compete with – each other internally, as they are principally designed to deliver information in one language.

If such pre-existing English source text elements (i.e. text and/or speech) remain prominent within signed language translations, they essentially determine the semantic structure and sequence of what is supposed to be a coherent, stand-alone Auslan message – one requiring different timing and prioritising of content. From the perspective of deaf signing audiences, possibilities for understanding such translations are therefore differentiated by an individual's recognitional or even embedded English competencies, rather than maximal Auslan competencies and comprehension, i.e. the audience profile who most rely on Auslan translations

¹⁵ Open captions are fixed to the screen and cannot be hidden or turned off by the viewer, whereas closed captions are optional for the viewer and activated by user selection.

(see Section 2.3). Yet these types of translation formats are common online and have generally been accepted without challenge as translation briefs by clients and translation producers.

5 Further insights from focus group discussions with deaf and hearing signers

5.1 Prompt and response themes identified in focus group discussions

This section summarises key insights from 10 focus group sessions with 24 deaf signers and 21 deaf and hearing translators from five Australian capital cities (Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney). Two focus groups were held in each city: one for deaf signers who are the target audience of Auslan translations, and one for deaf and hearing translators involved in producing translations. Participants were all proficient Auslan signers who had personal and/or professional relationships with others in their focus group. Many were also experienced translanguaging practitioners, e.g. deaf interpreters and others employed as case managers supporting more vulnerable deaf signers in the community. Participants used Auslan to communicate directly with each other and the two focus group facilitators, who were also deaf signers. Groups in each city were asked to view two or three sample translations identified during the online audit and discuss different aspects of them, including signing quality, technical quality, target audience comprehension, translation processes, and the notion of creating translation standards. The resulting 20 hours of video data was analysed with ELAN software (Crasborn and Sloetjes 2008) using Applied Thematic Analysis methodology (Guest et al. 2012).

Briefly, this involved summarising each person's Auslan comments in written English on tiers in ELAN, and identifying the Prompt Theme(s) for each comment on other tiers, e.g. Audience, Presenter, Captions, etc. ELAN software was preferable to other software more commonly used for qualitative analysis such as NVivo, because all annotations could be time-aligned to Auslan content captured in the filmed data. This means the connection between the written English summary comment and the original Auslan signing was maintained. Participant comments and Prompt Themes were then analysed further to identify the Response Themes that emerged, e.g. "presenters should be deaf", "captions should be optional", etc. In total, 16 Prompt Themes were identified across the

data, and 567 Response Themes were generated (see Hodge et al. 2015: 27 for more detail). The analysis presented here is based on selected Response Themes.

Quantitative and qualitative thematic analysis of these discussions suggested that overall, the emerging English/Auslan translation industry is developing effective practices for the technical aspects of video production. However, most participants expressed concern about the format and delivery of the Auslan message content. The main issues related to target audience comprehension, the use of English captions and other semiotic resources, presenter signing style and quality, and the use of audio prompts, autocue and voice-over as part of the translation process and target text. These concerns relate to the complexities of Auslan networks described in Sections 2 and 3, and the unrealistic expectation that Auslan can be closely and consistently aligned to an English source text and still be conceptually coherent, as noted in Section 3.2.

Crucially, participants also identified a lack of appropriate early contextualisation for many translations, which usually led to misunderstanding content throughout the entire text. In other words, effects of the nascency principle were not sufficiently addressed in the translation by using repertoires and information scaffolding matched to target audiences. Participants noted that the potential for deaf signing audiences to engage with and understand a signed translation is therefore often derailed from the beginning.

In the following sections, we focus our attention on selected themes relating to audience needs, the signing quality of the sample target texts, and suggested standards for translation production (Hodge et al. 2015: 27). We acknowledge limits to generalising the qualitative data from individuals in these focus groups. For example, although comments from the deaf signing audiences and deaf and hearing translators generally aligned with each other, translators tended to be less critical of the quality of sample translations viewed. This was possibly due to their own repertoires and/or professional understanding of the pressures of translation work, and that they had more to say about the challenges of translation production, because we asked them.

5.2 Use of English-based strategies within sample signed translations

Focus group participants offered a range of views on the English-based communication strategies used. These include views on the extent of English words mouthed with signing, fingerspelled English words, and the production of Auslan signs in English word order, so that the signing was sequentially and temporally aligned to English source text presented in the open or closed captions.

Participants provided only minimal commentary on the use of English mouthing: only one participant observed that English mouthing may help to differentiate regional sign variants for viewers who may not be familiar with the variant used (see Rowley and Cormier 2021 for similar observations by deaf BSL signers). This is predictable given our understanding of the use of English mouthing by Auslan signers more generally (see Section 2.1). It also echoes Steiner's observations regarding BSL interpreters' use of English-dominant registers and how this affected comprehension by different deaf audiences (1998: 120).

However, several participants expressed doubts about the use of extensive fingerspelling of English words to transliterate source text information that did not have a direct word/sign equivalent, especially for deaf audiences who have experienced systemic barriers to education. Some translators acknowledged that English fingerspelling is overused in some translations because of a specific client brief to align the Auslan signing with existing spoken and/or captioned English source text items, rather than any strategic need for fingerspelled transliteration. It was agreed that these temporal and structural English alignment constraints often hindered a translator's ability to create a more natural and dynamically equivalent translation to match target audience needs.

Participants suggested any use of fingerspelling to borrow and refer to unfamiliar complex terms or concepts present in the English source text should be elaborated using additional Auslan explanation and/or other visual images. However, they also acknowledged that strategic English fingerspelling can be useful, when the signing presenter seeks to orient the viewer to important terms or utterances in the English source text, e.g. a word embedded in a visual image. In such cases where transliteration was determined as either strategically beneficial or an acceptable compromise, fingerspelling of individual words or even full sentences matching the English text was generally preferred over a contrived "one Auslan sign aligned to one English word" strategy. Given the asymmetries between Auslan and English with respect to available standardised lexicons and mode differences, attempts at literal sign/word matching usually lead to further misunderstanding and confusion.

5.3 Use of English open or closed captions

Generally, both audiences and translators dispreferred English open captions on screen with the Auslan signing. Participants had strong views on the presence of open captions, commenting that they are "distracted by the Auslan and captions together" and "captions can mess up my understanding if they do not align with the signing." When a filmed Auslan target text was clear and natural as a stand-

alone message (i.e. a communicatively equivalent translation), the inclusion of open English captions forced the audience to watch two visually competing languages at the same time. Translators also commented that pre-existing open captions often anchor them to the English source text form, forcing the production of extreme literal translations of the English content, syntax and timing.

This results in translations that depend more on one's ability to read and understand written or signed English. As explained in Section 4.2, these texts eclipse access for deaf signers with restricted English competencies, as they are least able to comprehend written English source texts presented alongside Auslan. Indeed, participants stated these translations are "a waste of time, because deaf people who can read well can access both English captions and signing, but deaf people who cannot read well will be confused by both captions and signing."

Some participants said that captions are useful in disambiguating unclear or unfamiliar Auslan signs, e.g. an unfamiliar or poorly articulated sign, or a confusing mouth pattern. For example, one participant commented that "captions provide backup if I do not understand the Auslan, because I am not used to the presenter's signing." However, this reliance on English captions points more to ineffective Auslan delivery and/or translation choices. Overall, participants suggested that closed – not open – captions would enable more choice and better access for deaf signing audiences. This would recognise the integrity of stand-alone Auslan translations and release them from being forced lock-step alongside the English source text. Participants separately acknowledged the value of English captioning of spoken English television broadcasts for all deaf and hard of hearing audiences, where spoken and written modes of the same language do naturally align.

5.4 Use of different signed communication practices

Participants offered a range of views on individual translation presenter's signing quality and use of different signed communication practices. A comfortable signing pace that is "beautiful Auslan and facial expression" was emphasised as important for both initial comprehension and a precursor to deeper understanding of content. The signing pace in several sample translations was observed as too fast and rushed – and therefore unnatural – mainly because the presenter was trying to adjust their Auslan signing pace to the information density and timing of the contemporaneous English source text.

For example, one deaf viewer commented they know a specific interpreter presenter to be a generally excellent interpreter, but "they do not do well in this case, because the video is too fast and with too much information." Such complex

source material needed more time to deliver clearly in Auslan. These comments applied particularly to texts that were effectively recorded live interpretations, tightly constrained by English audio source text prompting and timing. This process is often seen as a quick and less expensive option for translation production, but allows no opportunity to create and refine an accurate and measured translation in Auslan.

Participants did not explicitly discuss different types of signs or constructions used in Auslan texts, such as a presenter's coordination of conventional and less conventional signs for depicting and/or indexing meaning within their physical signing space (see Section 2.2). This is unsurprising given such metalinguistic awareness and discussion was – and still is – rarely available to deaf learners during their education, and very few deaf signers have had opportunities to develop skills in linguistic analysis (see Section 2.3). However, translators did implicitly assign importance to these strategies. For example, they commented on sign choices they felt were inappropriate, and on missed opportunities for making meaningful use of space. They also commented when a presenter's signing was perceived as unclear, too exaggerated or unnatural compared with their usual – often admired – signing style.

Again, these problems were usually attributed to the unrealistic challenges of producing target texts forced to be tightly aligned to the English source text. For example, the translator of the Stay Smart Online sample translation was commended for doing a “good job in difficult circumstances” (Figure 3). The fast pace of the existing English audio file and captioned English meant she was forced to sign unnaturally fast, could not make natural use of eyegaze as an indexing strategy, and had to heavily paraphrase much of the content to align her signing with the source text timing.

Figure 3: Consumer view of sample translation Stay Smart Online.

In response to repeated examples of unclear signing, one translator participant stated that Auslan translations must be “natural, clear and accurate.” This neatly encapsulates the value of “natural sign” ideologies: to sign naturally and fluently means to be clear and accurate, and thus to be understood (see E. M. Green, 2014). These observations highlight implicit awareness of the nascency principle, whereby effective understanding pivots on well-chosen and matched repertoires and appropriate contextualisation of assumed knowledge.

5.5 Appropriate and meaningful contextualisation of assumed knowledge

As previously noted, educational disadvantage often results in significant general knowledge gaps or “fund of information deficits” (Pollard 1998; see Section 2.3). This means that some English words and concepts may only be understood by deaf signers who have maximum competencies with both Auslan and English, and understand a wide range of professional domains (see Blommaert and Backus 2013; and Section 2.4). The differential funds of knowledge between individual signers, and between individuals with different communicative repertoires more generally (e.g. deaf signers and hearing speakers), means that translators not only need to ensure their Auslan production is natural, coherent and minimally skewed to English form, but is also framed in a way that fills likely conceptual gaps.

Interpreters refer to this task as “expansion” (see Lawrence 1994) and it is a key strategy for addressing the nascency principle in signed interpretation and translation. Steiner recognised it as necessary for bridging the cognitive experience of “not understanding”, which forces signers to “make far more assumptions than native language users who have not had such a cognitive hindrance to message reception” (1998: 106).

Translators unanimously agreed that most translations required richer contextualisation of key concepts likely to be unfamiliar for many deaf signers. One signer described watching sample translations that lacked appropriate contextualisation as like “jumping into cold water.” Others complained a deaf family member or client would not be able to understand the existing signed message, and said they would need to re-interpret the content for them in person to make it both relevant and comprehensible. They explained that when they communicate day to day with many deaf signers, they would first establish the topic, and then “need to change my signing to connect everything to their life experience.” They commented that “re-explaining for deaf clients – repeating everything – is the same as doing translation work.” This highlights the difficulty of identifying the target audiences for a translation, and pitching a target text that will be effective,

especially if the target audience aims to include deaf viewers who require more scaffolding of new and unfamiliar information.

Apart from accommodating variable knowledge bases and language profiles, there is sometimes a need to contextualise and expand an unfamiliar source text lexical item regardless of audience. Often there will be no single conventional sign for a majority language concept and/or English term that will be automatically understood and used by most deaf signers. This is due to regional variation and because signs, as do words, conventionalise as a function of use. One example of an English term with no standard Auslan lexical match is the English word *tender* (i.e. the process of inviting proposals or bids to provide goods or services). In this case, conventionalization would depend on a critical mass of Auslan signers working within white-collar business domains (see Section 2.4). Although some deaf people do work in these settings and frequently refer to tender processes in business and organisational contexts, this sign and concept is not yet widely understood or disseminated across the broader signing community.

In this instance, the translator produced a manual sign that is commonly used by a subset of deaf signers familiar with business discourse and simultaneously mouthed the English word *tender* to try and “double-code” the concept (see Figure 4). However, this translation choice still created confusion for many deaf signers in the focus groups. For example, several participants commented that it looked like the signer “just put his hand up in the air” and they did not infer anything meaningful from the action. The attempt to disambiguate the sign by simultaneously mouthing the English word *tender* was also unsuccessful. Effective speechreading relies on recognising and inferring known and predictable words; when used unexpectedly and without other contextual clues, English mouthings can create confusion rather than clarification.

Figure 4: Manual sign and English mouthing used to express the concept of “tender”.

With more preparation time and source text analysis, the translator could have better contextualised this content by expanding the concept and/or elaborating the new term using borrowing e.g. fingerspelling the word T-E-N-D-E-R, and then introducing the sign while mouthing the word and expanding on what it means in that specific context. This is an example of how the nascency principle affects specific translation texts: the combination of using a new sign without appropriate contextualisation and consideration of assumed knowledge meant that audience comprehension of this segment was set up to fail.

Another sample translation demonstrating the need for greater contextualisation related to romance scams. The English source text featured a male correspondent who wanted to convince a woman he was “romancing” online to part with \$10,000 for his daughter’s alleged urgent operation. Participants found this an unrealistic scenario for most deaf signing audiences, given the unlikely possibility of having \$10,000 to hand over in the first place. They also commented it was a very specific example (a romance scam) used to demonstrate a more general issue (financial scams). Without broader contextualisation, there was a risk that some deaf viewers would only understand the translation literally, i.e. that only this version of events could occur, and not also some other kinds of financial scams.

The most popular translation across all focus groups was commissioned by the Victorian Financial Ombudsman Service. The English source text was transformed into a scripted Auslan dramatic narrative, so that the core information was delivered via a conversation between two deaf actors, who are well-known and highly respected signing members of the Victorian deaf community. Participants found this format, presented in a natural and familiar discourse style, extremely effective.

Given the challenges of trying to contort an Auslan target text to sit alongside an existing English source text, the best decision for translation producers may be to push back against client demands for what are essentially signed English transliterations, and to negotiate the creation of an equivalent but more culturally and linguistically appropriate Auslan version. Such target texts are more likely to connect with the lived experience of intended target audiences, thus reaching and engaging a greater range of deaf signers.

5.6 Challenges in the production of signed language translations

Most translations must somehow reconcile the client brief with the overall aims and purpose of translation: to enable the target text “to function in the situation it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it

to function” (Vermeer 1989: 20, translated in Nord 1997: 29). Many of the issues described above result from tension between the client brief and the goal of audience design and accommodation in translation work (see Bell 1984). Wider community misconceptions about signed languages (especially the assumption that Auslan is a directly transliterated signed form of English) also inform unrealistic client expectations about how translations are created and applied. As a result, signed language translators often experience intense pressure to produce target texts quickly, which involves minimising production hours and therefore costs.

Best practices for creating signed language translations are still developing (Bridge 2009; Leneham 2005). There are currently no formal Auslan/English translation training programs, as NAATI do not yet offer translation accreditation for this language pair. The theory and practice of signed language translation (as opposed to interpreting) is also a relatively new and evolving component of Auslan/English interpreting programs. We are still contending with the traditional focus on translation techniques as between two written texts, and the dominance of simultaneous interpreting practices in signed language interpreting.

Another major challenge is the translation environment. As opposed to live Auslan/English interpreting, the production of filmed Auslan target texts is not usually situated in the direct presence and feedback of the intended target audience (see Napier 2011). Instead, the work is undertaken by translators (typically one or two signers) working from the English source text in an office or film studio. Ideally one member of the translation team serves as a language consultant for the presenter. Translators working with any language pair often work remotely from their intended audience, but the potential disconnect is exacerbated for translators working for audiences who have extremely diverse communicative repertoires. Tailoring one’s signing to a theoretical deaf signing audience, i.e. adjusting the metaphorical “dial” (see Figure 1), becomes more difficult when the likely diversity of the target audiences is both extreme and not physically present.

This leads to the final challenge identified in the review of Auslan translations online: the lack of quality assurance safeguards during the translation process to enable early identification of ineffective target texts (see Hodge et al. 2015: 57). As noted in the examples above, fund of information differences remain an issue for many deaf signers whose English repertoires and/or education have been restricted. For lexical and general knowledge gaps to be addressed, further explanation and explication – and therefore delivery time – is usually required to create effective translations that are dynamically equivalent to the English source text and which mitigate the effects of nascent languaging conditions. This includes analysing and unpacking the assumed knowledge within the original text and using examples (sometimes more than one) that relate to the shared experiences of

deaf signers. In other words, a greater tailoring of target texts to the intended audience.

6 Improving translations for diverse deaf signers

6.1 Reformulation of language ideologies and translation expectations

Despite the significant challenges faced by Auslan translators, it is certainly possible to create translations that are accessible for many deaf signers. This is evidenced by the positive appraisal and popularity of specific translations shown to the focus groups, as well as key elements of translations identified as relevant for deaf signers who do not understand English transliterations. However, this study has also revealed an implicit language ideology that is unjust and potentially harmful: given existing translation practices, deaf signing audiences – already under pressure from their variable language learning trajectories – are often unwittingly required to: (a) be plurilingual users of both source and target text languages; and (b) make sense of different communicative resources meshed together in different ways. This meshing does not reflect naturally emerging translanguaging strategies, whereby e.g. fingerspelling is used strategically to index specific English words. Instead, it is imposed by the conditions of the English source text.

Translations for speakers of other languages do not usually present two different languages in the same way (e.g. visually) at the same time: either the source text is captioned in the second language, so that the source language is heard and the target language is seen (e.g. spoken English with captioned Korean), or the voicing of the target language is dubbed over the source language (e.g. spoken Korean only). The forced simultaneous alignment of visual inputs from both source and target languages in English/Auslan texts creates immense cognitive pressure for both translators and deaf audiences. If a target text contains too many competing resources, each layer cancels the other out, sabotaging the reason for the translation in the first place.

6.2 Ensure translations properly index target signing repertoires

Empirical research has identified sociolinguistic motivations for Auslan variation, usually by prioritising analysis of data from “native and near-native signers” with

the important aim of identifying Auslan benchmarks based on signers who have experienced uninterrupted or early childhood signed language acquisition (see Johnston 2003; Schembri and Johnston 2013). However, given increasing numbers of deaf signers who learn Auslan later in life, individual signing repertoires are much less uniform than represented in the literature. The communicative repertoires of deaf signers who have not experienced familial and/or early childhood signed language development remains under-researched and largely undocumented. We know very little about Auslan variation relating to the experiences of deaf and deafblind Indigenous Australians, migrants, refugees, signers in regional or rural locations, signers who have been deprived of learning a first language, and deaf children and adults with disabilities.

More research is needed to describe these variable signing repertoires to better support translators to: (i) more explicitly identify their target audience (whether heritage signer, new signer or others) before analysing the English source text; (ii) apply metalinguistic analyses of the English source text meaning; and (iii) ensure that key elements of the identified target audience repertoires are responded to appropriately in their translations. Creating English subtitles that are based on translations of the signed target text, rather than showing English captions based on transcriptions of the source text, may reduce the cognitive collisions described earlier. There is also potential to develop strategies for accommodating more specific needs, e.g. deafblind audiences may benefit from specific colour backgrounds and on-screen contrasts. Source text information could also be radically restructured into more conversational formats such as interviews and dramatisations.

6.3 Implications for language and communication research and theory

A widely-accepted principle of social theories of language is that small scale encounters shape larger scale processes and vice versa (see Section 2.4). Processes of enregisterment, during which an emerging register becomes more and more indexical of specific sociocultural actions and identities across speakers, have been described for many different practices of hearing and speech communities (see e.g. Agha 2007; Gal 2015; Silverstein 2003). However, given the multiple complex factors influencing the language learning trajectories of deaf signers, we do not yet properly understand how these processes work in deaf signing networks, within which many deaf signers with “truncated” or “restricted” Auslan and/or English repertoires actively participate, or how these processes may be accounted for in translation productions. It is also possible for effects of the

nascency principle to manifest in similar or other ways across minority spoken language networks. For example, it has been shown that speakers of endangered languages develop emergent sociolinguistic variation, rather than monostylistic tendencies previously attributed to language endangerment (Kasstan 2019). It is clear there are many less well-understood but potentially powerful factors resulting from the personal and systemic challenges of using minority languages within majority language hegemonies that deserve our attention.

7 Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored what deaf signing diversity means for the creation of signed language translations in Australia. The emerging paradigm of translanguaging is useful for understanding and describing minority signed language contexts, yet it also risks challenging political efforts relating to signed language recognition. A parallel conundrum applies to the creation of translations from majority language source texts into signed target texts, such as from English into Auslan. Even though such translations are vital for providing deaf signers with access to information, the resulting target texts are often problematic.

Two main pressures affect the quality of signed language translations. Firstly, the extensive variation in signed language and translanguaging practices across networks of deaf signers in Australia. This is compounded by fewer opportunities for codification in specialist communicative domains and the entrenched marginalisation of signed languages in general. Secondly, the practical challenges faced by translators during the production of translations, especially those relating to client ideologies of how translations work and how they should be made. These pressures can negatively affect resulting translations, resulting in conceptual incoherence for deaf viewers. Either plurilingual signers must “read” the translation as if an English text, or signers with restricted English competencies do not understand it at all. Possibilities for understanding such translations are therefore differentiated by the ability to understand English.

Focus group discussions with deaf signers and translation practitioners in Australia determined that effective translations must include appropriate lexical choices (e.g. choosing a sign known to most signers and avoiding more obscure signs that likely index unknown domains of use) and coherent integration of signed communication practices (such as meaningful use of space and a natural signing pace). It also includes appropriate and strategic use of practices adopted from the ambient spoken and written language, specifically English fingerspelling and mouthing. Translations should reflect the communication practices used by

target audiences, rather than be distorted by the timing, pace and content of an English source text.

A further contribution here has been to identify the nascency principle as a key factor complicating possibilities for enregisterment across minority signed language networks, and therefore the creation of effective translations. Not only are signers required to perpetually redevelop new forms of expression for understanding the specific discourse and spatiotemporal context, but this involves significant labour. While deaf people continue to be denied access to optimal communication and education opportunities, possibilities for enregisterment of specialised Auslan domains, such as medicine and the law, may come second to these factors.

If Auslan translations are to be truly accessible for a diverse range of deaf signers, it is necessary to recognise how numerous historical and systemic disadvantages have influenced the evolution of deaf communication practices and individual repertoires, i.e. recognising the nascency principle. Rather than adhering to “bounded source language translated into a bounded target language” ideologies, it is necessary for translation practitioners to identify and navigate complex translanguaging tensions embedded across diverse signing networks (see also Steiner 1998). This is especially true if they are to engage deaf signers experiencing the least communicative and systemic mobility. In a strange yet consonant way, an effective signed language translation will reflect both these disadvantages and the collective solidarity that transcends them.

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