(Deaf) Interpreters on television: Challenging power and responsibility

Maartje De Meulder and Isabelle Heyerick

1. Introduction

Signed language interpreters find themselves in a continuously evolving profession. Dynamics in society, the Deaf community and the interpreting domain pose challenges and create opportunities. The emergence of Deaf interpreters (DIs) (Section 2) is one evolution in the interpreting profession. In this article, we will describe the traditional working domains of DIs (Section 2.1.) and argue why interpreting on television could be considered a “Deaf job”, based on nine different dimensions (Section 3). To illustrate how the emergence of DIs on television challenges power and responsibility, we will describe a case study (Section 4) based on recent developments in Flanders, Belgium concerning in-vision interpreting. The authors were both involved in these developments as participant observers (Denscombe 2003). The analysis of the case study, based on direct observation and informal conversations, document analysis and analysis of recorded performances of interpreter applicants and motivational interviews, leads to four future challenges (Section 4.4.). We conclude that by taking on these challenges, both DIs and HIs (hearing interpreters), as well as the Deaf community and mainstream broadcasters will benefit, resulting in real ownership by the Deaf community of their language.

2. The emerging profession of Deaf interpreters

For years people working in or with the Deaf community have been accustomed to the term “sign language interpreter” or in some cases the more old-fashioned “interpreter for the Deaf”. These labels imply hearing professionals who are trained to interpret in a bi-modal and bi-directional way: spoken language – signed language. Since the emergence of professional signed language interpreters who are Deaf1, a new terminology was needed
to stress the distinction. Apparently, the only obvious difference noticed was hearing status. The term “Deaf interpreter” became widely used when talking about a Deaf person who interprets from a signed language to a signed language, uni-modal. However, it soon became clear that those “Deaf interpreters” undertake more tasks than merely uni-modal interpreting. They also are sight interpreters, translators and transliterators in the domain of bi-modal and bi-directional interpretation/translation as explained further in Section 2.1.

Conventionally translating and interpreting are considered two interdisciplinary domains belonging to a general field of study but requiring specific skills, working form different source texts (written versus oral) and demonstrating different processes (interpretation versus translation) (Pöchhacker 2007; Chesterman 2004; Gile 2004). This leads to the assumption that Deaf people working on television should be called translators instead of interpreters, arguing that the source text is in a written form, provided through a teleprompter. However, this conclusion does not account for the process that occurs when a DI works from a teleprompter, but only values the modality of the source text. Rathmann exemplified in his presentation at the EFSLI 2011 conference that the process that occurs when presenting a written text in signed language on television can be analysed as an interpreting process using Gile’s effort model² (2009). Based on this theoretical framework, Rathmann distinguishes two modes concerning the conversion of a written text into a signed text. The first one he calls “teleprompter-based” and is used in visual media (TV, websites, e-books). The other one is a “paper-based” mode and can be applied when converting written documents (e.g. state documents) into a signed language. Following Rathmann, the first mode leads to (simultaneous) sight interpreting, while the paper-based mode can be termed sight translating. Sight interpreting entails the different phases of simultaneous interpreting, i.e., the interpreter reads and analyses the source (written) text while memory and production efforts are taking place and s/he needs to coordinate these processes in order to be able to take in new information. Moreover, the interpreter has no control over the pace at which the source text is rendered. Except for the usual lag time, the output cannot be delayed and is delivered simultaneously. When considering sight translating, the processes involved are those of a translation effort. The input is a written text as well, but is available to the translator at all times, who can allocate more or less effort to the reading and analysing process. The production process can be delayed in time and can be monitored both during the process and afterwards. Taking into account the process and efforts that take place and not (solely) the source text, we opt to call Deaf signers working on
television and other settings where the process entails all phases of simultaneous interpreting, as described above, “Deaf interpreters”

Various studies suggest that DIs or translators have been around for a long time, in many places and forms (Stone 2005; Leeson 2005; NCIEC 2009; Leeson and Vermeerbergen 2010). Van Gils (2007) quotes Howard and Scully (2006: 3):

“Certainly Deaf people have been interpreting on an ad hoc basis for centuries. An example appears when confronted with someone who has insufficient sign skills. One Deaf person may turn to another and sign “What did they say?” or “I don’t understand”. That clarification is interpreting. There is a rich history of interpreting by Deaf individuals, which begs to be researched.”

Indeed, within the oralist education system Deaf pupils had to clarify what teachers said for each other, and since the emergence of Deaf clubs bilingual Deaf people have always supported semi- and monolingual Deaf people by translating letters, newspapers and other information they were asked to translate or they deemed interesting to share with the community. These are examples of reciprocal sharing of skills within the community’s collectivist culture (Mindess 2000; Ladd 2003). All reports of Deaf individuals acting as interpreters stress the fact that this was an invisible task they were asked to undertake by other Deaf individuals. The interpreting was not recognized as such; the Deaf interpreters were not paid for the job and were more or less “helping out” (cf. the emergence of the first HIs). In fact, members of the Deaf community would decide themselves who they judged to be suitable to act as translators or interpreters. In a sense, this also reflects how HIs emerged. Before the establishment of official training programmes, Deaf individuals would know and decide which hearing bilinguals were suited to be interpreters (Cokely 2005).

Through the professionalization of interpreters, the Deaf community has lost this mechanism of control. Nowadays interpreter trainers are the ones deciding who is suited to be an interpreter and the selection and recognition is no longer in the hands of the community, but with official institutes and training programmes. At this point, professionally employed DIs are only surfacing in Flanders. It will be interesting to see, once official programmes in Flanders also take into account the training of DIs, how this will affect the community.

The fact that Deaf people would choose their interpreter (Cokely 2005) shows that they have criteria to judge which interpreter they prefer. Obviously, it is not sufficient merely to be a bilingual in order to be considered a good interpreter. This is true for both HIs and DIs. Although some people
might argue that being Deaf and a (near-)native signer is an adequate prerequisite, it takes more than (near-)native language proficiency to be considered a candidate interpreter. This misconception can also be found in qualified DIs. At the EFLSI 2011 conference Pelhate stated that “everybody has learnt that the best translation is the one where the translator/interpreter produces a text in his/her native language.”. And asked: “Who is therefore best placed to translate a French text in sign language?”.

Without nuancing this statement it might feel as if any native user of a language is adequately equipped to take up the role of interpreter or translator. This is not the case. As for any interpreter an extensive set of skills is required before they can adequately do the job. Further in the text, we will explore what these skills are.

2.1. Working domains of Deaf interpreters

Traditionally DIs function as relays between a HI and a Deaf person with minimal language skills, with no knowledge of the national signed language, or with mental health issues (Boudreault 2005; Van Gils 2007). In short, DIs are requested when a HI feels they do not have the skills to do the job by themselves or when a Deaf client explicitly asks for a DI. Working domains of the DI mentioned in various sources are: judicial settings, multi-cultural and multilingual settings, international settings (Boudreault 2005), social services and healthcare (i.e., medical and mental health) settings. Sometimes DIs are also provided to tailor the service to the needs of the consumer, e.g. Deaf-blind consumers or Deaf individuals with semi- or minimal language skills (Boudreault 2005). Very few sources (Stone 2009; Kyle 2007; Duncan 1997; Collins and Walker 2006) mention television as a possible professional domain for DIs (see Section 3).

Research by Van Gils (2007) pointed out that a Deaf relay interpreter can have various positive effects on the Deaf consumer. In a questionnaire answered by 257 interpreters, of which 123 were HIs and 134 were DIs, Van Gils offered nine possible positive values (Van Gils 2007: 40). All respondents claimed that the most important added value of a DI is the fact that the Deaf client is better understood. The second most valued effect is in the interpreting output itself: with a Deaf relay, the interpreting product seems to be better and less flawed. While the DIs judged that the clients would feel more at ease when a Deaf relay is present (78%), the HIs did not attribute the same importance to this aspect (42%). So, both HIs and DIs seem to agree that the Deaf relay has a linguistically added value, but HIs do not agree with
the presumption of DIs that there is also a socio-emotional benefit. We will discuss this later on.

3. **Deaf interpreters on television**

The Deaf translators/interpreters (T/Is) in Stone’s research (2009) understand the role they undertake in television as a furtherance of the role bilingual Deaf people have undertaken for many years. Deaf people taking on interpreting roles is thus nothing new (see Section 2 and 2.1.). What is new is that with the emergence of DIs on television, this role has become public. According to Stone (2009) it is this historical role that informs the translation style the Deaf T/Is in his research use today, a style he termed a “Deaf Translation Norm” (DTN).

Stone (2005) and Duncan (1997) mention that since the emergence of DIs working on television, there has been a lot of debate about whether HIs should work on television at all or whether this should be primarily “Deaf jobs”. Flanders is no exception. The emergence of Flemish DIs in the visual media and especially on television has spurred a lot of debate, both within the Deaf community and within the HI community. We will come back to this later in the text.

Although in the UK DIs’ appearance on television has almost become mainstream, this is not the case everywhere. Boudreault (2005) for example does not list the visual media as a possible working domain in a north American context, while in the UK the primary working spheres seem to be television and interpreting for immigrant Deaf and Deaf-blind people (Collins and Walker 2006; Stone 2009).

The literature on DIs is very scarce, and literature about DIs on television is virtually non-existent. Stone (2009) is the prime source to consult in this regard. His research examined Deaf and hearing T/Is working on British television and from his research and other references (see further), we can derive nine different dimensions why Deaf people with the right skills and attitude can and should work as interpreters on television.

3.1. **Practical dimension**

With some simple adjustments to working arrangements (e.g. providing an autocue, video footage and access to the script beforehand), Deaf people *can* work as interpreters on television.
3.2. Political dimension

Because Deaf people can do it, this adds a political dimension to the situation: these can be said to be “Deaf jobs” (Stone 2009). HIs should evaluate their role since they are already in high demand in the community where DIs are not always able to work. Another angle to this dimension is that Deaf people expect to be involved in producing the services they consume (Duncan 1997).

3.3. Empowerment dimension

By employing a Deaf person to interpret on television, this person acts as a role model for other Deaf people (Stone 2005) and their environment (hearing parents, family, friends, etc.). An in-vision DI shows another possibility of what Deaf people can achieve, even more since professional interpreting has traditionally been a hearing position.

3.4. Cultural dimension

DIs are cultural insiders. Good DIs have the ability to think as other Deaf people think, relying primarily on a visual experience of the world and visual conceptualisation of information (Stone 2009). They are geared to the minds of the viewers (Duncan 1997). This “sameness” and cultural identification is an important factor in establishing rapport and effective communication (Boudreault 2005).

3.5. Responsibility dimension

We posit that because Deaf people are members of and live in the minority community they interpret for, it can be argued that they have a different awareness of the responsibility they carry when interpreting, than HIs. Most HIs do not live in the Deaf community and as a result do not always see and feel the consequences of their interpreting performance. Research carried out by the Deaf Interpreter Institute (NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team 2009: 8) confirms this assertion:

“There was a belief expressed that for some Deaf Interpreters, strictly following the RID Code of Conduct may result in violating a higher level of
ethics – the ethic holding that Deaf people have a right to fully understand and participate in communication, and interpreters are to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that. Additionally, they felt that part of the expertise Deaf Interpreters bring to the field is knowing when to rely on their own inner guidance and go beyond the CPC (Code of Professional Conduct) if necessary. A suggestion was that there are two checkpoints along the way towards reaching the goal for Deaf Interpreters: 1) do no harm to Deaf consumers, and 2) every option to provide equal communication access is exhausted.”

Traditionally HIs in Flanders do not have any experience of what it means to be dependent on a third person for acquiring information, whereas the DI does. As will become clear later in the text, this experience is of crucial importance when applying to work as an interpreter on television.

3.6. Linguistic dimension

Apart from the self-evident fact that good DIs need to have (near-)native fluency, there is more to this dimension. Stone (2009) found that the 5 DIs in his research produce better cohesion, make different use of eye gaze, affirmation, negation and prosodic features, maximize the use of the shared cognitive environment (by incorporating visual information available from the video footage), incorporate enrichments and impoverishments into the target language (TL) to minimize the effort on the Deaf audience, and make use of re-ordering of information to produce an appropriate TL. His research also showed that DIs use a participant perspective, constructing the action or dialogue as if involved in the scene rather than external to it, while HIs use a more detached, observer perspective. Moreover, Stone (2009) posits that DIs are able to produce a “domesticated” TL text that does not look like a translation, giving the audience the opportunity to focus on the information rather than the interpreter. This all contributes to lesser effort on the part of the Deaf audience.

Stone (2009) further points out that the fact that the signed language has to fit into the mainstreamed programme and the absence of mutual adjustment (the HI needs to follow the speed of the hearing newsreader) can be a trap for HIs due to several factors: the complexity of the SL, lack of skills in the TL, lack of mastery of the signed language register or overreliance on certain structures that are thought to be culturally Deaf, but whose overuse identify the interpreter as an L2 signed language user. We further observe that many (Flemish) HIs do not master many subtleties of signed language, which is why they sometimes make mistakes with respect to cultural Deaf norms and
values, increasing the level of difficulty in understanding them and leading the Deaf audience to reject their performance. Two out of the three interpreter training programmes in Flanders are situated at the adult education level with a limited number of contact hours (i.e., not full-time). The third programme established in 2008 is a full-time Bachelor programme in Applied Language Studies with a possibility to pursue a Master in Interpreting where students are trained in interpreting between three languages (Dutch, a second language – English, French or German – and a third language) and can opt for Flemish Sign Language (VGT) as the third language. Since these programmes in Flanders are facing their own limitations (limited number of contact hours, financial constraints and institutional prescriptions) they are not (yet) achieving the level of language acquisition one would expect of an educational programme training interpreters for simultaneous interpreting in a wide variety of contexts. Therefore it is to be anticipated that professional L2 interpreters do not fully master all subtleties of VGT.

3.7. Language ownership dimension

This dimension is about who should be role-modelling signed language within the public sphere and about the need to see one’s own language presented by native users of that language (Kyle 2007). By not gate keeping these jobs, HIs give the Deaf community the opportunity to play a core role in publicly showing its language to the mainstream community (Stone 2009). Also it is claimed that the development of the language is the responsibility of the Deaf community (Duncan 1997).

3.8. Process/modality dimension

The way the source text is delivered to DIs is different from HIs, leading to a different outcome. The modality a DI works in is written text to signed production, whereas a HI receives the input in an auditory-vocal manner. This implies DIs do not receive any prosodic elements added by the speaker (pace, rhythm, intonation, etc.). Stone (2009) claims this reduces the influence of mainstream culture on the TL and enables DIs to create a Deaf-centred TL (within the confines of the hearing institution). He states this is one of the fundamental aspects of the Deaf Translation Norm.
3.9. Motivation dimension

While we do not aim to generalize, our experience in Flanders has taught us that most HIs’ motivation to work for television seems to stem from the idea that HIs can (and should) help Deaf people acquiring equal rights through access to information. This is made clear in statements the HI applicants expressed (see Section 4) when asked what their motivation is to become in-vision interpreters: “Deaf people have the right to the same information as hearing people”, “I want to help Deaf people to gain their human right to information”. This motivation differed from the DI applicants’ motivation, who tend to foreground the empowering and linguistic aspect; “acting as a role model”, “working to L1”, “making television accessible for deaf children who can’t read subtitles”, “news in own language”.

4. Case study: Deaf in-vision interpreting in Flanders

4.1. DIIs in Flanders

At the moment, there is no formal training for DIIs in Flanders and as a consequence, there are no trained DIIs. In Flanders there are three signed language interpreter training programmes of which two are adult education training programmes and one is an academic programme (cf. supra).

Currently, all professional HIs hold a graduate degree obtained at one of the two adult education training programmes. These two programmes are not accessible to potential DIIs but two Deaf students have started the academic training programme (BA in Applied Language Studies), which means it is possible the MA in VGT interpreting will also be open to Deaf students in the future. However, Flemish Deaf people have taken on interpreting roles for some time, during “official” occasions, mainly conferences, but also in situations where interpreting is needed for Deaf immigrants and for Deaf-blind people and in “unofficial” cases like the interpreting done in Deaf schools for Deaf peers.

In 2009 the Flemish Deaf Association (Fevlado), anticipating the new agreement between the Flemish public broadcaster VRT and the Flemish government (see 4.2.1.), which was expected to include some form of VGT on television, organized a training programme for Deaf people to train as in-vision presenters (following the Deaf community’s wish for an own signed news bulletin by a Deaf presenter, instead of an interpreter) and to improve their skills working between Dutch and VGT. Although the training was limited, it made the participants aware of the challenges and opportunities
to work in the visual media and developed their knowledge, skills and self-confidence. At the same time it stirred the broader interpreter community. How (some) HIs reacted and how their somewhat reluctant attitude can be explained, will be discussed later on.

4.2. Case study

4.2.1. Prologue

In July 2011, the Flemish government announced an agreement which determines the task and budget of the public broadcasting company VRT for the period 2012-2016. The agreement contained a new paragraph about signed language which said that, within one year after commencement of the agreement, the VRT commits itself to offer the 7 o’clock news and the youth news *Karrewiet* in VGT on the Internet (through live streaming) and to distributors of digital television. In addition, the agreement sets out that *Karrewiet’s* weekly summary will be offered on television in VGT before 2013.

During the last week of September 2011, the VRT wanted to pilot the provision of the daily 7 o’clock news and *Karrewiet* in VGT. In previous negotiations with the VRT, Fevlado had explicitly stated a preference for DIs for this job, based on the different dimensions we described above. Initially, both the Flemish Sign Language interpreter association BVGT and the VRT agreed with this position.

In the beginning of September, a screen test was organized. At the last moment however, the VRT decided to invite HIs to participate in the screen test as well and the BVGT sent out the call for interpreters to all its members. Stone (2009: 99) indeed mentions that “hearing interpreters in positions of power by virtue of their mainstream status introduce a level of tension. They are often brought in to interpret for meetings between Deaf T/Is and studios when wishing to establish in-vision news. Since the hearing interpreters are trained and qualified, the institutions can see them as sufficiently fulfilling statutory obligations.”

Five DIs and five HIs participated in the screen test. In consultation with Fevlado, a jury was composed consisting of two Deaf people working in a signed language interpreter training programme and who are regular interpreter users, and one Deaf representative of Fevlado. The VRT also invited a Deaf intern working on the project and two HIs, one of whom was the president of the BVGT. Both HIs had never worked on television. In the test, the candidates needed to interpret the 7 o’clock news. Because there was no
autocue, the DIs relied on a HI to relay for them. They were matched with a relay interpreter who was not always their preferred choice and in most cases the team had little if any experience working together.

After the screen test, one Deaf member of the jury, the presidents of the BVGT and Fevlado, the Deaf VRT intern, the head of the VRT news service and two VRT staff members in charge of the project, convened at the VRT to discuss the results. The Deaf jury members felt that the Deaf candidates, although not always conveying all the information of the original message, were easier to comprehend and provided the most pleasant viewer experience. The HIs, although losing less information, were not understood well and the general meaning of the interpreted message was often lost and judged lacking in overall cohesion. The HI present at the meeting endorsed this view, and admitted the HIs were not experienced enough for the job. The two DIs whom the jury preferred were disqualified by the head of the news service because of their looks and use of facial expression. Those would, according to him, not be appealing to a hearing mainstream public. This concords with Stone (2009) who speaks of “institutional constraints” on how DIs work in broadcast media; DIs have to construct a product acceptable to both Deaf and mainstream audiences in terms of cultural expectation, and not offending the majority’s cultural sensibilities.

4.2.2. Pilot week

In the end, the VRT decided to select one DI and one HI for the pilot week, who would daily alternate interpreting the news and Karrewiet. The script for the 7 o’clock news was rarely available beforehand so both the DI and the HI had limited preparation opportunities. The DI interpreted the news through a relay interpreter, although occasionally when a foreign language was spoken, she would interpret directly from the closed captions. For Karrewiet, the autocue script was available beforehand, therefore the DI was able to prepare this better and did not rely on a relay interpreter. However, the autocue for Karrewiet was derived from closed captions which are neither verbatim nor 100% correct.

4.2.3. Evaluation

The VRT and Fevlado clearly wanted to evaluate the pilot week. The VRT set up a webpage with closed questions in Dutch which were translated in VGT,
although it was only possible to answer in Dutch (not the preferred language of most Deaf respondents). Therefore, Fevlado tried to collect direct feedback from Deaf people, by watching the interpreted pieces together and film their feedback immediately after that. Unfortunately, due to time and financial constraints, this did not happen. A Facebook page was set up where Deaf viewers could give feedback. However, everybody (including HIs) had access to this page. This led to some Deaf people not wanting to put their feedback on the page for fear of reactions from HIs they depended on for their work and private life.

4.3. Analysis of the case study

4.3.1. Methodology

We were both involved in the case study we describe here as participant observers (Denscombe 2003). One of the authors is a former staff member of Fevlado and was closely involved in lobbying for DIs on television and during the start of the negotiations with the VRT. The other author is an experienced HI, a teacher at one of the Flemish Sign Language interpreter training programmes and a signed language linguist. During the project, she was consulted by both Fevlado (for advice during negotiations with the VRT and BVGT), the VRT (as a member of the second jury and as a possible applicant) and by other HIs who considered taking part in the screenings and wanted her advice. Both authors have, both professionally and personally, a long-term involvement with the Flemish Deaf community and are well known for their active interest in this topic, which means a lot of informal conversations about DIs and HIs with many different people happened over time. Both authors are members of the Advisory Board on VGT.

This position enabled us to base the data collection for this case study on the ethnographic method of participant observation (Denscombe 2003). Participant observation involves a range of methods, of which we primarily used a combination of direct observation and informal conversations (through our involvement in both the Deaf and the interpreter communities), document analysis (through the Facebook group mentioned above) and analysis of recorded performances of applicants and motivational interviews (to which one of us had access as a jury member).
4.3.2. **Feedback from the Deaf community**

There were virtually no comments about the HI and the scarce comments greatly differed. Some Deaf people we talked to said they understood her better, others said she made lexical and grammatical mistakes or complained that she was using a form of Signed Dutch. The lack of in-depth feedback about the HI could possibly be attributed to two reasons. First of all, it seemed the main focus of the pilot week was the DI, who was doing something new and Deaf people were anxious to see how she would do. Secondly, it could be attributed to the fact that Flemish Deaf people generally are still prepared to accept HIs performing below standards just to have some “access” and the common view that “any interpretation is better than none”. This does not mean the HI was doing a poor job, but it may mean that most Deaf people often “forgave” her grammatical or lexical mistakes (or did not even see them).

The comments about the DI differed. For most Deaf people who provided feedback on the Facebook-page or talked to us, the very idea of a DI was something they were not used to and a pilot week of only five days was too short a time to expect any useful feedback. When the DI made mistakes, this was mainly glossed over by comments like “oh but it’s only her first time, she will improve” but also left some people wondering whether captions weren’t a “safer” option. The only recurring feedback was about the DI’s dominant use of the West-Flemish regional variant of VGT, which made her less intelligible to (especially older) Deaf people from other regions.

Some people said they preferred captions because they were not used to watching the news with an interpreter.

“I have been used to closed captions for a very long time already. Thanks to this, my language development is being enhanced. I am not used to watching signing on television. This means: adapting again and learning to ‘read’.”

(comment on Facebook page, 20/09/11)

“[… ] such a VGT interpreter is quite useful when there aren’t any closed captions available but right now I honestly don’t see the added value. Don’t understand me wrong, I’m happy we finally can see VGT on TV but when I watched for the first time I got tired of it very soon because you had to concentrate on the interpreter all the time and you missed what was happening on the screen.”

(comment on Facebook page, 20/09/11)
This could be linked to the Deaf education system in Flanders, which was and still is guided by a strong ideology of oralism. Most Flemish Deaf people have never in their lives processed large amounts of information in VGT and they do not seem to know how to cope with this. Due to a limited preparation, technical limitations and having to rely on a HI, the DI could not achieve a Deaf Translation Norm (Stone 2009) and could not produce a desired target language, which would be easier for the audience to process. It “being exhausting for them” can also be attributed to the fact that it is hearing, mainstream media made “accessible” for Deaf people through an interpreter. This does not seem to minimize the cognitive efforts of the Deaf viewers. Moreover, it has long been known that Deaf people have a clear preference for Deaf-led and Deaf-constructed programmes (e.g. a Deaf news bulletin signed by a Deaf presenter) (Kyle 2007; Kyle and Allsop 1997). Since only a very small minority of the Flemish Deaf community use interpreters on a regular basis (for work or private purposes) (CAB annual report 2011) it can be expected that the “average” Deaf person may find interpreted data harder to process.

Although many Deaf viewers expressed happiness and relief that they finally could watch the news in their mother tongue, much of the discussion on Facebook centred on the fact that closed captions (and not VGT) were helpful for Deaf people’s “language development”:

“[…] with closed captions we learn for future communication with hearing people .. with VGT we learn nothing new because we already know it. I think closed captions are important for deaf people so they can make good sentences.”

(comment on Facebook page, 20/09/11)

This attitude and way of thinking could suggest an underlying diglossic context where VGT has traditionally been used in certain contexts (Deaf families, friends) only while Signed Dutch or Dutch is used in others (education) (Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2004).

Although we have stated earlier that Deaf people have taken on interpreting roles for some time already starting at school, it seems that this role becoming public leads some Deaf people to question the reliability of a DI:

“A HI could translate this, she has experience. A DI… I doubt that. Okay, they master VGT as their mother tongue, but if something happens suddenly, how will they be able to translate this? Or if the presenter adds something extra, how can the translator know if she herself is deaf?”

(comment on Facebook page, 19/09/11)
Boudreault (2005) confirms this and states that Deaf people are often suspicious and confused about DIs. Most Deaf people needed the five days of the pilot week just to become used to the very idea of a Deaf person interpreting for them. Added to this was the fact that the VRT allowed only one DI, leading to many comments linked to the style and performance of this person’s idiolect instead of the general viewer experience of a DI.

Most Deaf viewers watched the news through ‘interpreting eyes’ and not through “Deaf eyes”. Watching the captions at the same time, they tried to “spot” the interpreter making mistakes, missing information, translating in a wrong way or lagging behind the hearing newsreader:

“What I DO like, is catching mistakes ☺”

(comment on Facebook page, 19/09/11)

Stone (2009) mentions this is indeed typical of a Deaf audience who all have some knowledge of the majority language due to their education. They thus have the power to criticize and hold the interpreters accountable for possible mistakes. While this may appear to be something bilinguals do all the time when working with interpreters, the situation for Deaf people is quite different since most of the time they do not have access to either the source language (when watching a voice-to-sign interpreter) or the target language (in the case of sign-to-voice interpreting).

4.3.3. Feedback from the interpreter community

While the Flemish Sign Language interpreter association BVGT initially supported the idea of DIs working on television, they changed their position during the course of the negotiations. As mentioned earlier, HIs find themselves in a difficult position. They can serve as advocates for DIs while they also feel they are entitled to accept this kind of work. When it became clear that the VRT wanted to test both DIs and HIs, this created an adversely competitive environment. In fact both the Deaf community and the interpreter community were being held hostages of decisions made by the VRT. Unfortunately the relation between the HI community and the Deaf community proved not strong enough to form a team trying to reach what would be in the best interest of the Deaf viewer. HIs argued that they had received formal training while DIs had not. Whereas we agree that being a native signer is not sufficient to make a good DI, we argue, based on the nine dimensions we distinguish for this particular interpreting setting (see
Section 3), that a hearing L2 learner cannot/should not take up the responsibility of interpreting on television.

Moreover, HIs were given power by their mere presence during the pilot week and negotiations. Since they share the same language and culture as the people in charge at the VRT they had easier access to the decision makers whereas Deaf people had not, or only through interpreters. This resulted in HIs having the power to advocate for or against taking DIs on board. Indeed, Van Gils (2007: 19) states that in traditional settings the HI has the power to decide whether a DI will be provided or not. As Shepard-Kegl, McKinley, and Reynolds (2005) put it: “The decision of whether a Deaf interpreter is needed still remains for the most part in the hands of hearing interpreters.”

As mentioned earlier, we believe that there is a difference between how HIs and DIs view their responsibility as interpreters. Whereas the HIs in the case study more or less view themselves as language brokers, DIs attribute themselves a role which seems to go further. HIs considered themselves qualified for the job and regarded in-vision interpreting as part of their work. Therefore some of them did not grasp why a Deaf “unqualified” person should even be considered. This could indicate that HIs do not realize which responsibilities this kind of interpreting entails or it could point to a perceived threat (Cokely 2005; Duncan 1997).

4.3.4. Outcome of the pilot week

After the pilot week, it became clear that the VRT had received only very limited feedback from Deaf viewers. In November 2011, the VRT announced they would – because of technical and staff issues – not be able to provide DIs for the 7 o’clock news. Karrewiet would be presented by a DI since the script is available beforehand. Fevlado argued that a relay interpreter could be used for the news so that Deaf people could still do it, but according to the VRT this was impossible (again) due to technical limitations.

In January 2012, a screen test was organized for DIs and HIs and again, a jury was composed. The Advisory Board on VGT suggested jury members to the VRT, and the VRT selected four of them: two HIs and two Deaf people involved in interpreter training. Out of the ten HIs who applied, the jury judged two capable of interpreting on television. For Karrewiet, five Deaf people applied, and three were selected by the jury. However, the VRT needed eight and preferably ten DIs and HIs each and opted to allow other interpreters, not selected by the jury, to join in on the training that will be offered by the VRT.
4.4. Future challenges

4.4.1. Training and professionalization

This case study has made clear that both Flemish DIs and HIs are in need of training if they want to work on television. We concur with Stone (2009) that the question of who is seen as desirable to interpret on television is a very complex one. We need to realize and accept that good DIs by virtue of their visual biology and native language skills, have that “little something” that L2 HIs will never achieve. On the other hand, just to be Deaf is not the answer. DIs need training in three major areas: language (both signed and written), the interpreting process and the code of ethics. They need to strengthen their bilingual skills (Boudreault 2005) and they need signed language linguistics and meta-awareness of the language (Stone 2009). As for the interpreting models, they will need to understand the complexity of translation and interpreting based in the Deaf community (cf. the Deaf Translation Norm, Stone 2009). Last but by no means least, the code of ethics will need to be tailored to incorporate what it is DIs does/ can do, which might in some cases differ from HIs.

The training for HIs needs to be adapted as well. At the moment, two out of the three training programmes do not offer in-depth signed language linguistics and none of them offer training linked to Deaf models of translation and interpreting (and it is in this area that DIs and HIs can greatly learn from each other). Also, both DIs and HIs need to learn how to work in a team and establish trust relationships, and be made aware of the responsibility they carry when interpreting on television (see also 4.4.3.).

4.4.2. Awareness about the interpreting process

Raising awareness about the interpreting process for hearing people, decision-making institutions and Deaf people seems to be of the utmost importance. When the functioning and limitations of HIs or DIs are clear (and the limitations of interpreting a mainstream “hearing news” for a Deaf audience), broadcasters will be able to make a more informed decision concerning the use of HIs or DIs, or a signed news bulletin. Successful examples of Deaf in-vision interpreters (e.g. the UK) can and should also serve as models for other countries. The interpreting process for a HI is different from a DI because of various factors, as explained earlier. This leads to HIs and DIs having a different interpretation output and they may have a different view.
on what interpreting is. As Boudreault (2005: 352) states: “A Deaf interpreter is not only responsible for the linguistic information itself but also for understanding and mediating cross-cultural differences from a Deaf perspective, which is a very crucial aspect of the successful communication process.” For Deaf people, awareness about the interpreting process would enable them to value the interpreted text based on the information they receive, the clarity and cohesion and allow them not to merely compare it to the source text and “judge” the effectiveness of the translation.

4.4.3. Sense of power and responsibility

The question about who is interpreting on television is first and foremost a question of power and responsibility. First of all, DIs and HIs bear a major responsibility when appearing on television, because they act as language models for a vulnerable minority language. It seems that some DIs and most HIs are not aware of this responsibility, or put it aside arguing, “I am entitled to do this because it is my job”. As we mentioned in 4.4.1., the fact that these attitudes and viewpoints exist, could point to the Flemish interpreter training not contributing enough to make HIs aware of this responsibility and the possible risks for themselves and VGT. Moreover, as we pointed out in 4.3., HIs in many cases still have the power to decide whether DIs will be provided at all and how this provision occurs. This can happen by their mere presence as interpreters during negotiations between Deaf representatives and the broadcasters (Stone 2009), and also through more consciously planned strategies when they represent themselves as possible candidates for the job.

It is not, however, only DIs and HIs who bear this responsibility; mainstream (hearing) broadcasters possibly bear the greatest responsibility. They have the power to decide who will interpret, and how the programme will be designed. The Flemish case study is an example of how an emancipatory policy decision (the agreement), where the state is simply required to provide services through the minority language, can turn out to have profound effects on the protection of the language and the language community, if that community does not have ownership of the design and control of the broadcasting (Dunbar 2001).

Despite advice from several experts on VGT and Deaf media, the VRT seems unaware of the profound consequences for the evolution of VGT if interpreters (both Deaf and hearing) are selected who are not capable of
acting as appropriate language models. It remains a major challenge for the minority community to raise this awareness.

4.4.4. Research

As the DI profession is still very young, it is understudied. Research will help to develop our understanding of how DIs and HIs differ, how they are the same and how they can learn from each other. Literature on DIs is scarce and information on how HIs and DIs relate to each other is virtually non-existent or only focuses on power relations and issues (cf. Van Gils 2007; Duncan 1997). It would be helpful to the signed language interpreter profession (including both HIs and DIs) to identify which (different) strategies are used by DIs and HIs. Assessing which of these are successful and which are not will positively contribute to the on-going professionalization.

5. Conclusion

While DIs have been around for a long time, it is only recently that they have become visible in Flanders, Belgium, especially at conferences and as possible interpreters on television. This stirred the debate both within and between public broadcasters, the Deaf community and the interpreter community about what DIs do, and when and why DIs are needed. Traditionally DIs are requested in conventional settings or for certain consumers when a HI feels s/he cannot adequately do the job. Interpreting on television is rarely mentioned as a possible professional domain for DIs and more often than not, HIs feel they can adequately do this job.

In the UK and recently in Flanders it has become clear that television is and should indeed be a working domain for DIs. In this article, we distinguished nine dimensions why Deaf people with the right skills and attitudes can and should work as interpreters on television.

The case study of in-vision interpreters in Flanders made clear that DIs and HIs are confronted with several aspects leading to certain power issues. We can conclude that some of the issues are caused by the attitude of HIs and DIs, others by lack of awareness in the Deaf community and still other issues because of the views and unawareness of broadcasters.

Based on the analysis of the case study it is obvious that the future poses challenges, which can hopefully lead to some new opportunities. Four chal-
Challenges need to be tackled: training and professionalization, awareness about the interpreting process, sense of power and responsibility and research. All of these should be met to benefit the broadcasting institutions, the DIs, the HIs and the Deaf community. For the broadcasting companies it will lead to a better understanding of the task at hand, a smoother cooperation and a product that will be accepted and valued by the audience. Whereas the professional situation of DIs and HIs will improve, the synergy will also lead to reciprocal learning opportunities. If the Deaf community takes on these challenges, it will enable them to gain control and real ownership of their language.

Notes

1. Since “Deaf” in this article explicitly means a culturally (signing) Deaf person, we will use the within Deaf Studies commonly agreed term “Deaf” throughout the text.

2. Gile (2009) distinguishes three efforts in simultaneous interpreting: (1) efforts in listening and analyzing; (2) efforts related to production; (3) short-term memory efforts. All these efforts must be co-ordinated according to the available capacity of the interpreter.

3. The authors would like to stress that it is very uncommon to name an interpreter based on audiological parameters (i.e., being deaf or hearing) and not on the interpreters’ working languages. Moreover, some of the characteristics of interpreters we will mention in this article are rather due to the interpreter being a L1 or L2 language user than to the interpreter being Deaf or hearing. At the same time, we concur with Stone (2009), that some features of the Deaf Translation Norm are related to the visual biology and cultural aspects of being Deaf. The “Deaf” in “Deaf interpreter” can thus refer to a cultural attribute instead of a mere hearing status. Since Deaf interpreter has become a widespread term, we will not cause any confusion by introducing a new label, but we are aware of and interested in the on-going discussions about this label.

4. The authors are aware of the exceptional position of CODA interpreters (hearing people who most of the time have a signed language as their L1), also linked to the nine dimensions we will discuss in part 3. However, the scope of this article does not allow to expand further on this. When we use the term ‘HI’ in this article, we always mean hearing L2 learners, not CODA’s.

6. Van Gils (2007) concluded that DIs are most commonly provided for (and considered necessary for) the following clients; (1) Deaf children (49%), (2) Deaf elderly people (46%) and (3) Deaf immigrants (42%)

7. The informants were five Deaf T/Is who regularly work within the media, presenting news footage live from English (via autocue) to British Sign Language (BSL). They are between 40 and 50 years old, have between four and ten years of experience, and they all work in the same geographical area. They all come from Deaf families and have BSL as their first and native language; they would all consider themselves to be culturally Deaf; and they have meta-awareness of the task they are undertaking, including knowledge of the linguistics of BSL from formal education and work at the university level (Stone 2009).

8. Some signs can be judged inappropriate in certain situations or when used with certain signers. One example is the sign for breast, which has several lexical variants. One demonstrates the shape of a woman’s breast, whereas the other is a more neutral flat hand shape located on the breast. The first variant is considered inappropriate when talking about medical situations or in an all-female group of signers.

9. The MA in Flemish Sign Language (VGT) interpreting was founded in 2008 at the Subfaculty of Language and Communication of Lessius/KULeuven in Antwerp.

10. Traditionally the expected level of students starting any interpreter training would be a B1 level (cf. CEFR) in the foreign language(s) and a C1 level (cf. CEFR) of the mother tongue. The two adult education programmes for VGT interpreters state that the achieved level upon completion is a B1 to B1+ level. The MA training at the Subfaculty of Language and Communication of Lessius/KULeuven was established in 2008 and too few students have graduated up to now to assess the students’ language skills according to the CEFR (personal communication Myriam Vermeerbergen, 19/07/12).

11. Deaf people seem to estimate this issue as a much higher priority than most hearing-run organisations (like public broadcasters) (Kyle 2007).

12. The notion of “gate keeping” was established in communication research in the early 1950’s by David Manning White. The metaphor refers to the complex route of news texts from the original producer to the end user. Vuorinen (1997) defines it as the process of controlling the flow of information into and through communication channels. She applies the notion to research translated news items (from English into Finnish) and states: “The gatekeepers decide what messages or which pieces of information shall go through a particular gate and continue their journey in the channel and what not (“in” or “out” choices), and in what form and substance these messages are allowed to pass.”
13. E.g. coining new signs, choosing which signs to use, grammar etc.
14. Where they interpret from a foreign signed language into VGT and vice versa.
15. The training was given over three weekends by three Deaf trainers (Danny De Weerdt, Tessa Padden and Clive Mason) and entailed translating from Dutch to VGT (including cultural translations), different styles in VGT, presenting and translating with and without autocue and presenting- and interviewing techniques. There were nine participants. It was an unofficial training in that there were no formal assessments. There also was no partnership approach with any of the established interpreter training programmes.
16. Although the agreement does not specify what “to offer the news in VGT” means exactly, the common (political) interpretation seems to imply that the news will be made “accessible” through signed language interpreters. This interpretation ran contrary to the preference of Fevlado, the governmental Advisory Board on VGT (see footnote 20) and many Deaf people themselves, who prefer “Deaf media” in the form of a signed language bulletin presented by a Deaf presenter. However, the scope of this article does not allow to expand further on this.
17. This was actually quite ironic since the way in which the news would be broadcasted (through a separate page on the Internet and a separate page of television on demand) would lead to the hearing mainstream public not coming into contact with the signed language news, or only very sporadically.
19. The Advisory Board on VGT was established by the Flemish government as a result of the recognition of VGT in 2006. Its task is to advise the government in all matters related to VGT.
20. Signed Dutch is a system for “visualizing” spoken Dutch by means of signs (Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2009).
21. Flemish Sign Language consists of five regional varieties which have developed in and around the different Flemish deaf schools in the different provinces: West Flanders, East Flanders, Antwerp, Flemish Brabant and Limburg (Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2009).
22. In 2011 (CAB annual report) 1562 Deaf people were entitled to interpreting hours in private settings. Only 735 persons actually requested interpreting services, bringing the average to 10.82 interpreting hours/person/year. For work settings, 1662 users could request interpreters, of whom 362 actually did. This leaves the average of requested and provided interpreting hours in work settings at 31 hours/person/year.
23. The organisation CAB is the Flemish interpreting agency, set up and funded by the Flemish government.

24. Based on motivational interviews the VRT jury had with them during the application procedure.

25. Personal communication Siegrid Leurs, president of BVGT, 31/08/11.

26. Technical issues entailed: the availability of text for the autocue since the script for the news is ready only at the very last moment and during the filming and broadcasting of the news only one studio was available. As for staff, the technical staff of the 7 o’clock news needs to be ready for another programme right after the news so postponing to a later hour (but with DIs) was not possible.

27. By this we mean specific contents for interpreting on television, not the general level of Flemish HIs’ training, which, in our opinion, needs to be adapted as well.

28. Experts such as Fevlado (the Flemish Deaf Association), the VGTC (Flemish Sign Language Centre), Deaf teachers at the interpreter training programmes, the Advisory Board on VGT and Deaf consumers.

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