

A Study on the Challenges Faced When Interpreting Expressions Made in Sri Lankan Sign Language into Sinhala

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Abstract

Sign Language is a visual means of communicating using gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Like other world languages, it has systematic grammatical and morphological structures. It is the primary mode of communication for individuals with hearing impairments. In Sri Lanka, many deaf children born into deaf families, use Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) as their mother tongue. As such, deaf signers use SLSL fluently, embodying its cultural and community-specific nuances. However, it is observed that when translating ideas conveyed through SLSL into Sinhala, numerous challenges arise. Against this background, this study attempts to identify the key linguistic, cultural, and technical obstacles encountered in translating from SLSL into Sinhala and explore strategies for mitigating them. In this context, the data were collected from fifteen professional and community-based sign language interpreters via semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and Google Forms surveys. The findings emphasize the challenges posed by the variations in the signing pace, regional and abbreviated variants, semantic shifts, form–movement variations, grammatical incompatibility, lack of deaf cultural awareness, detection difficulties, community signing preferences, and unstructured signing. These challenges lead to misinterpretation, loss of meaning, and communicative breakdowns. Recommendations, include standardizing SLSL through a national corpus and lexicon, establishing accredited interpreter training programs, integrating deaf cultural competency modules, promoting public awareness, and leveraging technology such as video annotation tools. Implementing these measures is supposed to facilitate high-quality SLSL to Sinhala interpretation, ultimately empowering deaf individuals and fostering inclusive communication in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Deaf Culture; Sign Language Interpretation; Sri Lankan Sign Language; Translation Challenge

Introduction

Language is both a cognitive tool and a vital social connector, enabling individuals to articulate complex thoughts and engage meaningfully within their communities. For Deaf individuals, sign languages provide a rich linguistic structure that can fully express abstract concepts, emotions, and complex ideas just as spoken languages do. Sign languages use visual-spatial modalities, including manual gestures, facial expressions, and body postures, to encode semantic and syntactic information (Klima & Bellugi, 1979). Among the many sign

languages worldwide, Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) is the primary language of the Deaf community in Sri Lanka, particularly for those born into Deaf families where SLSL is typically acquired as their mother tongue.

Despite the fundamental role SLSL plays in the lives of Deaf individuals, it faces significant challenges within the broader societal and institutional framework in Sri Lanka. Unlike spoken languages, SLSL has not received formal recognition from the government, and it lacks standardized resources such as textbooks, dictionaries, and curricula that are commonplace for spoken languages. This lack of official recognition contributes to social exclusion, limiting the educational, social, and professional opportunities available to Deaf individuals. Furthermore, the absence of a national sign language corpus impedes the development of consistent and standardized interpretation practices, particularly in formal settings like legal proceedings, healthcare, and education.

In these domains, sign language interpreters play a pivotal role in bridging communication gaps, facilitating access to essential services for Deaf individuals. The accuracy of interpretation is critical, as any misinterpretation or omission of information can lead to significant consequences. In educational settings, inaccurate translation can hinder learning, while in legal and healthcare contexts, it can compromise the rights and well-being of Deaf individuals. Therefore, the quality of sign language interpretation directly affects the lives of Deaf people, influencing their ability to participate fully in society.

Translating ideas from sign language to a spoken language is not merely a process of lexical substitution. It requires a deep understanding of the linguistic structures that underpin both languages. For example, Sri Lankan Sign Language uses topic-comment structures and spatial referents that differ significantly from Sinhala's subject+object+verb word order and linear clause structures. (Napier, 2002). Additionally, sign language communication is inherently visual and spatial, involving non-manual markers such as facial expressions and body posture, which do not have direct counterparts in spoken languages. These structural and visual differences create unique challenges for interpreters as they must reconcile two divergent grammatical systems while preserving the meaning context and cultural nuances.

Furthermore, SLSL is not a monolithic language. Regional familial and individual variations influence it, which can further complicate interpretation. Variations in sign production and vocabulary usage across different regions or Deaf communities mean interpreters must navigate differences in grammar, vocabulary, and signing conventions. These variations can lead to semantic distortions, omission of key information, or culturally inappropriate translations. Inaccurate interpretations can perpetuate misunderstandings, reinforce stereotypes, and create barriers for Deaf individuals in accessing their legal, educational, and healthcare rights.

Given the increasing demand for qualified interpreters in Sri Lanka, driven by a growing awareness of Deaf rights and the need for greater inclusivity, it is crucial to understand the specific challenges that arise in SLSL–Sinhala interpretation. This study aims to:

- Identify the primary linguistic, cultural, and technical challenges faced by interpreters in translating Sri Lankan Sign Language into Sinhala.
- Illustrate how these challenges manifest in real-world interpretation contexts, emphasizing the impact these issues have on Deaf individuals' access to essential services.
- Propose evidence-based strategies to enhance interpretation quality, improve interpreter training programs, and advocate the standardization of SLSL and its resources.

By examining these challenges and offering actionable solutions, this research aims to improve communicative accessibility for Deaf individuals in Sri Lanka. It also seeks to promote the recognition of SLSL as a legitimate

language, fostering greater inclusivity and ensuring that Deaf individuals' linguistic rights are upheld in both formal and informal contexts.

Materials and Methods

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the experiences of sign language interpreters. Fifteen interpreters aged 25 to 55, with 2 to 20 years of experience in educational, legal, and healthcare settings, were purposively selected. Participants were recruited through Deaf associations, interpreter networks, and Deaf schools.

Data Collection Instruments

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews conducted in SLSL and Sinhala to explore interpreters' subjective experiences, specific challenging instances, and coping strategies.
- **Questionnaires:** Administered exclusively via Google Forms.
- **Field Observations:** Non-participant observations of live interpretation sessions (with consent) were conducted, including visits to observe and interact with Deaf schools across Sri Lanka. These observations helped triangulate self-reported data and provided valuable insights into the real-time challenges faced by interpreters and the Deaf community in various contexts.

Results

Interpretation challenges cluster into fifteen themes, as identified by interpreter experiences and observational data:

Rapid Signing Pace

Many Deaf children who learn Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) from birth learn signs as quickly as people speak. This fast signing can be hard for interpreters to follow, making it difficult to understand and translate accurately into Sinhala in real time. To improve, interpreters should practice with fluent Deaf signers, starting at a comfortable speed and gradually increasing it. This helps interpreters develop better processing and prediction skills, reducing mistakes and missed information.

Translational Mismatch

Deaf children need to know that what they sign is correctly changed into spoken words. If the interpreter's translation is wrong or unclear, the child might repeat the sign, which can be frustrating. To avoid this, interpreters should learn more sign language words and work closely with Deaf children to understand their signs better. This helps them to give correct and precise Sinhala translations.

Unstructured Signing

Just like learning to read and write needs proper teaching, using sign language also needs formal education. Deaf children who do not learn Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) in properly often create their own signs at home. These "home signs" can be hard for interpreters to understand. By spending time in Deaf communities and learning the correct SLSL signs, interpreters can better understand these personal signs.

Regional Sign Usage

Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) changes from place to place based on local culture and environment. For example, in Kurunegala, some people use the sign for "laundry" to mean the colour blue. These regional signs can confuse interpreters who do not know the local versions. Having a standard sign collection along with a record of regional signs can help interpreters understand and correctly translate these differences.

Abbreviated Sign Forms

Deaf children sometimes shorten signs to make them quicker and easier, just like people use short forms in speech (like “can’t” for “cannot”). If interpreters are familiar with these common short forms, they can guess the whole meaning and avoid mistakes in translation.

Participant Reluctance

When a Deaf child does not want to sign or is forced to, their facial expressions and eye movements may show that they are uncomfortable. This can make their signs unclear. Interpreters should watch for these signs of reluctance and try to create a safe and friendly space. This helps the child sign more clearly, which is important for correct translation.

Interpreter Communication Skills

To translate sign language into Sinhala well, interpreters need to be good at understanding themselves, working with others, and handling cultural differences. If an interpreter speaks too forcefully or shows too much emotion, message’s meaning can change. Staying calm and balanced helps them clearly pass on what the Deaf person is saying, without adding their feelings.

Conceptual & Cultural Understanding

To translate signs correctly, interpreters need to understand how Deaf people think and what their signs really mean in context. Some signs are closely connected to culture, like the difference between “donation” and “worship.” If the interpreter doesn’t understand the Deaf community’s background, they might get the meaning wrong. Talking to family members or getting a cultural explanation before interpreting can help fill these gaps.

Grammatical Alignment

SLSL and Sinhala have different grammar rules. For example, SLSL often uses topic-comment structure and space, while Sinhala uses subject-object-verb order and shows tense with word changes. Interpreters can reduce grammar mistakes by practicing both languages and attending grammar training.

Lexical Disambiguation

Some signs in SLSL look very similar but mean different things—like “I,” “me,” or “my,” or “morning” and “night.” These slight differences in handshape or direction are important. Interpreters must practice spotting these small changes to avoid confusion when translating into Sinhala.

Form-Movement Variations

Deaf children sometimes change how they sign—like using a different handshape or movement—to make signing easier. However, these changes can make it hard for interpreters to understand. Watching facial expressions and surroundings, and knowing the correct sign forms, helps interpreters understand the real meaning.

Semantic Shifts

Some signs can have more than one meaning. For example, one sign might mean “friend” or “Friday” depending on the situation. Interpreters must use clues like facial expressions, the setting, and culture to determine the correct meaning. Creating collections of these signs with notes can help them learn.

Conceptual Misunderstandings

Sometimes, Deaf children misuse signs because they have not learned the correct ones. This can cause confusion. Interpreters should work with the children to gently correct mistakes and explain the right signs. This helps both the child and interpreter improve communication.

Ethical Standards

Good interpreting is not just about language—it also requires strong ethics. Interpreters must keep things private, stay neutral, and treat everyone respectfully. Learning national interpreter rules and regular ethics training helps them stay professional and trustworthy.

Detection Difficulties

When interpreters do not recognise a sign or when the sign is shortened too much, important parts of the message can be lost. To improve their understanding, interpreters should regularly watch and follow along (shadow) with fluent Deaf signers and participate in group video practice where others can give feedback.

Conclusion

This study has shown that interpreting Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) into Sinhala involves complex linguistic, cultural, and technical challenges. Rapid signing pace, regional and abbreviated forms, unstructured signing, grammatical mismatches, and limited awareness of Deaf culture often led to misinterpretation and communicative breakdowns. These issues affect the accuracy of interpretation and restrict Deaf individuals' access to education, healthcare, and legal services.

The findings highlight the need for both linguistic and institutional responses. Standardizing SLSL through a national corpus, strengthening interpreter training with Deaf culture modules, and integrating technological tools can enhance interpretation quality. At the same time, public awareness and policy recognition of SLSL are essential to ensure that the language and its interpreters gain professional and social legitimacy. By addressing these challenges through coordinated educational, technological, and policy measures, Sri Lanka can move toward more equitable communication, empowering the Deaf community to participate fully and inclusively in society.

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