

INTERPRETING WITH INTEGRITY

SOUTH AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

By: Stella Nolan

A South African Sign Language Interpreter is a lesser-known profession. Interpreters play a pivotal role in facilitating communication between two parties speaking a different language. Likewise, sign language interpreters serve Deaf people communicating with the typical speaking community.

A South African Sign Language Interpreter (Interpreter) must be able to work in a team, have strong spoken communication and South African Sign Language (SASL) skills, public speaking confidence, the ability to maintain intense concentration and think rapidly. However, the most important is integrity with a sense of responsibility to remain neutral.

Sign Language is not universal globally, as there are many dialects like British Sign Language, American Sign Language and German Sign Language. In the context of spoken communication, people from different countries do not necessarily communicate in the same language. For example, in a conversation between a German person only speaking German and a British person only speaking English, each would struggle to understand the other.

Over the past year, intending to broaden inclusion, TFM Magazine has had eDeaf interpreters participate in the 'Talking Transformation' Summit. The two-hour webinar now boasts participation from the Deaf Community, who before could not interactively participate on such a platform.

For five years, Dimakatso Martina Motimele has been an Interpreter at eDeaf. Her primary role is to facilitate conversations and relay messages between Deaf and hearing parties in the public and private sectors. She holds the highest form of accreditation by the South African Translators Institute (SATI). She is studying for a Master's Degree in Interpreting at the University of the Witwatersrand. Currently, she is considering applying for a PhD program next year and simultaneously opening up more opportunities by learning International Sign Language.

What motivated you to become an Interpreter?

While studying SASL at the University of the Witwatersrand, I liked how I could use my face and body to communicate and express myself. I met Deaf people, who were highly passionate and inspirational, for the first time during my years as a student. I realised there was a scarcity of Interpreters in South Africa and that people knew very little about the profession. For me, this was the perfect opportunity to build a foundation and grow in the industry.

What does accreditation do for the person using the services of an interpreter?

Many people are under the impression that if one knows SASL, one can become an interpreter, which is not true. As a professional interpreter, one would need to have undergone training and, ideally, obtained a certificate or qualification in interpreting.

The SATI is the largest association in South Africa representing translators and language practitioners who are academic and professional. The SATI Code of Ethics goes beyond facilitating access to communication. It guides professional conduct and maintains vital principles like confidentiality and remaining neutral. The association focuses on South African Sign Language professionals and other spoken languages. People can study to become professional interpreters at The University of the Witwatersrand, The University of the Free State and North-West University. Short courses are available at the Wits Language School where one can specialise in learning to interpret.

What are the consequences of using an Interpreter with no accreditation?

Many people mistakenly believe that if one uses SASL, one can become an interpreter without further training. An infuriating and embarrassing example is the inadequate performance of the Interpreter at Nelson Mandela's funeral, but the incident did create awareness. The public at large became aware of the size of the Deaf Community and it put the importance of credible and accredited Interpreters in the spotlight.

*"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us."*

Marianne Williamson

There is currently no language board for Interpreters, which has unfortunately led to no regulator holding individuals accountable for interpreting services rendered to the public. Another consequence is unregulated prices when accepting and rendering services. It further leads to individuals not being adequately skilled or trained, thus increasing incidents of exploitation.

How important is the credibility and integrity of an Interpreter?

The role of an interpreter is based on trust. The person you are interpreting on behalf of is relying on receiving correct information. From a corporate perspective, these values are paramount when interpreting for a Deaf Learner during an interview, an employee induction programme or a disciplinary hearing. From a personal perspective, a Deaf person generally needs an interpreter when dealing with financial, medical or specific work-related issues. Therefore, credible interpretation with integrity is critical to the well-being of the Deaf person.

There are times when interpreting when I have to remove my human empathy and relay the communication I receive in the same harsh manner and tone as it was relayed to me. There needs to be more awareness about the role of an interpreter. When the communication channel is murky between the Deaf person, the third party and an interpreter, it hinders my work. When I meet with a Deaf client, I am merely the vehicle of communication. With the lack of understanding of my role, people often look at and talk to me instead of the Deaf person, the one with whom they are actually communicating.

On reflection, how would you describe your chosen profession?

It is stressful, but I love my job. I meet new people every day from all walks of life. Daily, I step into a new environment, engaging people of different cultures, backgrounds and different sets of communication skills. I am constantly reminded of how important communication is and how my skill is a tool that opens communication channels between the Deaf and hearing communities.

I constantly have to overcome challenges to the benefit of the Deaf people for which I interpret. Often, in both a Deaf person's personal and professional lives, whether good or bad news, as their interpreter, I hear the news first and pass it on. When I interpret in life-changing sessions, it can be emotional, but I have to overlook my feelings and focus on the integrity of my job. However, over the years, I have learned how important it is to find healthy ways to cope with stress and deal with emotions due to the different situations I deal with daily. My choice of self-help is meditation, which creates mindfulness. Core to my well-being is the help and advice I get from my mentor in the field, who understands the sometimes emotional challenges of the job.

