

# Translation and Interpreting Studies

## Barrier-free and interpreter-free: deaf signers and hearing sign language interpreters' perspectives on an ideal world and the role of sign language interpreting services (Belgium, Flanders). --Manuscript Draft--

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Globally, deaf associations and sign language interpreters' organizations support the idea that interpreting services equal access and inclusion for deaf people. Researchers have challenged this by pointing to 'the illusion of inclusion' (Russell 2007, Russell and Winston 2014, De Meulder and Hualand 2021), the 'institution of access' (Brunson 2011), and the fact that interpreters are needed but not wanted (Pöchhacker 2019, Sheneman 2020).

This paper explores whether sign language interpreting services are the ideal solution when providing access to communication, information, and services for deaf signers. It presents the perspectives of three deaf employees of the Flemish deaf association and four hearing Dutch - VGT (Flemish Sign Language) interpreters on their 'ideal world'. By addressing this topic, interviewees considered whether in this world sign language interpreting services would still exist and expressed their views on topics such as communication, access, (in)equity, and inclusion.

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***Introduction***

Deaf signers (or Sign Language People (Batterbury, Ladd and Gulliver 2007; Kusters, De Meulder, Friedner and Emery 2015) in communication with non-signers can adopt a range of communication strategies. De Meulder and Hualand (2021, 24) mention linguistic and semiotic resources such as the use of gestures, speech, writing, mouthing, or any combination

of these. In line with other scholars (Kusters 2017; Moriarity Harrelson 2019; Tapio 2019) they acknowledge that deaf people can use their linguistic repertoires in a flexible way and that the way access to communication, information, and services is experienced, is as complex and diverse as deaf people's identities and language practices (De Meulder and Hualand 2021, 23). Nonetheless, it is assumed that when in-depth communication is required between a deaf signer and a hearing non-signer, a sign language interpreter is needed (Young, Oram and Napier 2019, 91) making sign language interpreters a so-called "persistent and not transient experience" (Young et al. 2019, 92) in deaf signers' lives. In addition to making communication possible between signers and non-signers, many deaf associations and sign language interpreter associations around the globe demand from governments and service providers that their communication, information, and services are made accessible for deaf signers by providing sign language interpreting services. Consequently, linguistic access for deaf signers on the institutional level is by default organized by providing an interpreter who works between a spoken and a signed language. This is, for instance, the case at conferences, for debates at political institutions such as the European Union and United Nations, in mainstream education, medical settings, juridical contexts, and media. In some of these contexts, accessibility to the spoken language is also supported by providing captions. This is a historically developed and currently widely accepted practice of by-passing the fact that deaf people cannot hear the spoken language, and that most hearing speakers cannot sign (Harris and Bamford 2001; Brunson 2011; 2015; De Meulder and Hualand 2021; Young et al. 2019; Caselli, Hall and Henner 2020). The institutionalized character of this solution is not only visible in practice, i.e., in how linguistic access is provided for deaf signers, but also in the ideologies, advocacy, and policy work of organizations striving for access for and inclusion of deaf people. The concept of *access* is prevalent in discourses about deaf signers' rights. Additionally, the social, political, and academic contexts that discuss deafness and deaf rights, (more) commonly

use terms such as *diversity* and *inclusion* (Kusters et al. 2015). Currently, it seems that for public service providers and policy makers, sign language interpreting services have become synonymous with providing access and inclusion for deaf signers. One explanation could be found in the fact that what access and inclusion means in the context of deaf signers' full participation in society is not always well-defined. One example can be found in the World Federation of the Deaf<sup>1</sup> (WFD)'s Charter on Sign Language Rights for All (2019). The Charter emphasizes that access for deaf people in society and their inclusion can only be obtained through the use of sign languages. *Access* is attributed values such as equal (articles 1.3.; 4.4.), and full and effective (article 1.4.). What the *inclusion* of deaf people (articles 1.1.; 1.3.; 2.2.; 4.2.; 5.5.) or an *accessible and inclusive* environment (article 4.2.) constitutes of is not specified, except in the context of education (article 3.1.)<sup>2</sup>. The Charter offers two ways in which the use of sign languages can help to obtain access and inclusion. First, article 3.3. proposes that people who directly interact with deaf people should be offered sign language training. This seems to suggest that in certain cases a deaf service user and a service provider should be able to communicate directly through a shared sign language. Secondly, there is mention of guaranteeing the inclusion and participation of deaf people in society by providing full access to qualified and accredited sign language interpreters and translators (article 4.2.). The Charter thus proposes that access, inclusion, and full participation of deaf signers can be achieved through language concordant services, or/and through mediated (i.e., sign language interpreting services) services. However, it seems that on an institutional level, the latter option is more commonly implemented than the first one. To illustrate this, we can bring into focus how the provision of information for deaf signers during the COVID-19 pandemic was handled. At an international level, the WFD, at times in collaboration with the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), issued several statements and guidelines on how to secure the right to equal treatment of deaf people in the context of the pandemic. In

their statements of March 2020, January 2021, and January 2022, the organizations urged governments and official bodies to ensure full access to information regarding COVID-19 measurements and accessibility to services during the pandemic by providing (1) sign language interpreting services, and (2) information created and distributed in sign languages. This would take the form of sign language interpreted and subtitled televised announcements, and informational videos issued by governments in the appropriate national sign language and with subtitles. Nonetheless, the most common solution provided by policy makers was sign language interpreting services. The request to also offer information originally designed and created in signed languages was not honoured by most official bodies. Consequently, in some countries, deaf organizations and/or individuals took it upon themselves to provide information in their national sign language. This has led the WFD to denounce that “throughout the pandemic, national associations of deaf people have served on the frontlines of the pandemic, ensuring accessible information for their members. This frontline status needs to be recognized and compensated by governments and aid organizations.” (WFD 2022, 4).

The assumption that access for and inclusion of deaf people can be achieved by providing sign language interpreting services leads to the observation that “The provision of SLIS (*sign language interpreting services*) has become the institutionally normative, often unquestioned, solution to grant deaf people access to education and public services” (De Meulder and Haualand 2021, 31). Many national campaigns demanding access to COVID-19 information for deaf signers indeed adopted the idea that governmental information should be provided through sign language interpreting services. Campaigns would criticize the lack of (visibility of) sign language interpreters during crucial televised public service announcements, introducing slogans such as #InterpretersSaveLives<sup>3</sup> and #WhereIsTheInterpreter<sup>4</sup>, and reiterated the idea that access to institutional communication, information, and services should be obtained through sign language interpreting services.

These campaigns did not consider the various ways in which deaf people can and prefer to organize their linguistic access in different contexts. De Meulder and Haualand (2021) state that “Deaf people’s use of interpreters has to be seen in the context of contextual language and modality choices” (23). However, the question remains whether these choices are truly and equally available and, if the options are available, who has the power to decide how linguistic access for deaf signers is realized. Current discourses and ideologies surrounding sign language interpreting services which propose that interpreting services are a prerequisite for public service and information provision, might limit deaf signers’ choices and make it increasingly difficult to obtain alternative linguistic services. The fact that most policies and advocacy work devote more attention to linguistic access through sign language interpreting services and less to language concordant services, reinforces the idea that interpreting services are crucial for the successful participation and inclusion of deaf people in society (see the WFD Charter and recent campaigns demanding access to COVID-19 information). This in turn perpetuates the illusion of inclusion (Russell 2007; Russell and Winston 2014; De Meulder and Haualand 2021) and might lead to the assumption that sign language interpreting services are always needed and wanted. However, Sheneman (2020) points out that “interpreters are uninvited guests in deaf people’s lives” and similarly, Pöchhacker (2019) states that “interpreters are needed but not wanted”.

Additionally, the increased visibility of sign language interpreters during the pandemic and the increased demand for their services at institutional levels and in the media has raised concerns. Issues about the perception of the profession, of signed languages, and of deaf people and their communities have surfaced. The increased visibility and (media) attention for sign language interpreters has led to discussions about ownership, the role of the interpreter, and the ‘fractious interdependence’ (Napier 2002a, Napier 2002b, Napier & Leeson 2016, Gile & Napier 2020) between deaf people and sign language interpreters. These conversations are not new and are

an intrinsic part of critically (re)evaluating and rethinking what interpreting is, and what interpreters (should) do. Recent developments where sign language interpreters – rather than the service they provide – have become a prominent part of the public eye have (re)invigorated such debates.

The increased visibility in tandem with the observation that interpreting services are, in general, perceived as a prerequisite for accessibility brings the discussion to what this paper seeks to explore: what are deaf signers and hearing sign language interpreters' (in Flanders, Belgium) perspectives on an ideal world and the role of sign language interpreting services in such a world? This contribution reports on seven interviewees' view of an ideal world, on why interpreters are – at times – needed, which alternatives for interpreting services deaf signers and hearing sign language interpreters envision, and what they regard to be preferred ways of communication.

### ***Researcher's position***

Before turning to the study, I want to critically consider my relationship with the community of practice I research (Etherington 2004; Flynn 2010), the topic, and my biases (AUTHOR 2021). As a hearing researcher within the field of Deaf Studies it is essential to critically contextualise my position and research within the existing socio-political structures (Kusters, De Meulder and O'Brien 2017; AUTHOR 2021). Considering the position and stance I have towards the object of study and the community on, for, and with whom (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson 1992; AUTHOR 2021) I conduct research can help mitigate my unavoidable bias and add transparency and rigour.

I am a hearing white cisgender female unrelated to any deaf people. I became HEARING<sup>5</sup> (Bauman 2015; Subak 2016) and a new signer at age twenty when I learned Flemish Sign Language (VGT) at the university. I went on to become an interpreter (spoken and signed

languages) and a sign language interpreting researcher and educator. I consider myself a practisearcher (Gile 1995, 15) whose research is informed by my experiences as an interpreter and interpreting educator, and by current research trends and topics. The research idea reported on in this article originated from my doctoral research project (AUTHOR 2021) and is a further exploration of the influence of ideologies on interpreters' practice. Interpreter participants in my doctoral research at times equated linguistic access with interpreting provision. This observation and the fact that at the time of the study the discussion on whether interpreters are needed but unwanted (Sheneman 2020; Pöchhacker 2019) led me to include this topic in a follow-up study. My own biases and assumptions being that access does not equate inclusion and that interpreting services are not the sole avenue for deaf people to gain linguistic access. However, as I am a hearing interpreter the interviewees might have assumed that I support the idea that sign language interpreting services are a prerequisite for accessibility. Through these interviews I wished to gain insight into what deaf people and hearing sign language interpreters bring to this discussion and what the implications can be for debates regarding accessibility, inclusion, and the provision of interpreting services.

With respect to my relationship with the interviewees, one of the interpreters is a former student of mine, and two are former interpreting colleagues. I have worked as an interpreter on several occasions for two of the deaf people who participated in the study and one of them was my colleague from the time I worked at the Flemish deaf association (Doof Vlaanderen) over ten years ago. I recruited the participants using a purposeful sampling method and specifically selected the interviewees based on their professional profile within the VGT interpreting community; i.e., deaf employees of Doof Vlaanderen working on accessibility and/or interpreting issues, in-house hearing sign language interpreters of Doof Vlaanderen, and the former and current president of the professional interpreting association in Flanders (BVGT).



In the following section I consider why I sought to include participants with these specific profiles and the implications of this decision.

### *Participants, method, and analysis*

Recent research (AUTHOR 2021) suggests that some of the linguistic decisions interpreters make, i.e., strategies (Jones 1988; Cokely 1985; 1992; Gile 1995; Kohn and Kalina 1996; Napier 2002a; Pöchhacker 2004; Russell and Winston 2014; AUTHOR 2021) they apply or reject, are based on ideologies they hold regarding language, deafness, and interpreting. This study invited seven participants to take part in semi-structured interviews. The interviews tapped into which ideologies have an impact on the interpreters' practice, where these ideologies originate from, and how they affect the interpretation. In order to contextualize the interviewees' views and perspective on the act of interpreting as a situated activity (Pöchhacker 1995; 2004; Setton 1999; Roy, Brunson and Stone 2018) they were asked to describe how they envision an ideal world, and additionally if interpreters would be part of that ideal.

The first group of interviewees was made up of three deaf employees of the Flemish deaf association. All three employees are, on the one hand, experienced sign language interpreting service users who work with interpreters in their professional and private lives. On the other hand, they are also involved in shaping policy/ies regarding the provision of sign language interpreting services as representatives of deaf people in Flanders. In their professional capacity they do advocacy work informing governmental bodies regarding the issue of access to communication, information, and services for deaf signers in Flanders. The first participant has been assigned the pseudonym Eric. At the time of the interview, he had been an employee of the deaf association for twenty-five years. He is also the federation's former president and CEO. The second interviewee, Adam, was responsible for advocacy work regarding access and several topics concerning interpreting. The third employee, Lissa, worked mainly on the topic

of education and pedagogy, including sign language interpreting services in mainstream education. The following table provides an overview of the three deaf participants, their assigned pseudonyms, and professional expertise:

Pseudonym	Age	Expertise
Eric	51	CEO and former president Doof Vlaanderen
Adam	28	Policy officer for: - accessibility and interpreting - media
Lissa	30	Policy officer for: - education - pedagogy - interpreting in mainstream education

Table 1: overview participant group 1

The second group of participants consisted of four hearing Dutch - VGT interpreters. Two (Anna and Charlotte) are the designated interpreters of the Flemish deaf association. They have an availability agreement with the association and can be booked by the association's employees at specific days and times. The interpreters are not employees of the deaf association and are paid as freelancers through the interpreting agency. They interpret internal and external meetings, lectures, and provide more diverse linguistic tasks (e.g., proofreading, translating, captioning). The remaining two interviewees (Olivia and Emily) are the current and former president of the BVGT. Since the former president had been in office for eight years, and the new president had taken on the position only two years ago, both were interviewed.

Presently, hearing Dutch - VGT interpreters are trained at various levels and professional interpreters can either hold a graduate certificate (through vocational training) or a postgraduate degree (at the university level)<sup>6</sup> (AUTHOR 2021). One of the designated interpreters (Anna) and the former president of the interpreters' association (Emily) are graduates from the vocational interpreting training program. The other two interpreter participants (Charlotte and

Olivia) hold a master and postgraduate degree in spoken and signed language interpreting. The following table represents the relevant information about the interpreters and their assigned pseudonyms:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Interpreting training</b>	<b>Interpreting experience</b>	<b>Expertise</b>
Anna	Graduate	1,5 years	Designated interpreter Doof Vlaanderen
Charlotte	Postgraduate	2,5 years	Designated interpreter Doof Vlaanderen
Olivia	Postgraduate	3 years	Current president BVGT
Emily	Graduate	15 years	Former president BVGT

Table 2: overview participant group 2

The profile descriptions show that the participants in this small-scale study are elite stakeholders as they have professional access to certain political discourses about linguistic access, inclusion, and equality which other deaf people or hearing interpreters might not have. The deaf employees and current and former presidents of the professional association for sign language interpreters were purposefully selected for this study as their views and opinions will have a bearing on policies regarding deaf rights and the organization of sign language interpreting services. To understand how certain ideologies pertaining to language, deafness, and interpreting might inform interpreters' practice, the deaf association's in-house interpreters - who regularly interpret high-stake meetings between deaf activists and policymakers - were invited to participate. The advantage being that these participants will be able to elaborate on the topics the study seeks to address. Disadvantages lie in the fact that the results only speak to the views and opinions of these elite stakeholders, a limitation which is further addressed in the discussion section of this paper.

All one-to-one and face-to-face interviews were done by the researcher in the preferred language of the participant (either in Dutch or VGT) and were videorecorded. The interviews with the deaf participants, done in VGT, were translated, and transcribed into Dutch by the researcher. The recordings with the hearing interviewees, done in Dutch, were transcribed by a professional language service. A thematic analysis of all interviews was carried out using ELAN<sup>7</sup> and mainly focused on the participants' ideal world views and the role of sign language interpreting services in that ideal world. Additionally, the analysis included more indirect references to topics related to the idea of an ideal society, access, inclusion, and equality.

The thematical analysis first mapped the data on an axis of several broad themes which emerged from the interviews. These included categories such as, for instance, (in)accessibility, (in)direct communication, (in)equity, inclusion, and language accommodation. Next, the participants' contributions were allocated to the corresponding topics and per participant citations were classified into the relevant category. Finally, a comparative analysis of the interview data across the participants was carried out to allow a further fine-tuning of the main themes, and to distinguish commonalities and differences.

### ***Findings***

This section reports on the thematical analysis of the participants' answers pertaining to what they envisage to be an ideal world, and their stance towards interpreting services in such a world. The participants were primarily invited to elaborate on what an ideal world means to them. The question did not specify to whom that ideal should be tailored, as in it was not framed as an ideal world for deaf people. It simply asked about participants' own views of an ideal world. However, all interviewees approached it from that perspective, and some introduced ideas of diversity and inclusion for all (i.e., not limited to deaf signers). As a follow-up, they were asked if interpreting services would be part of that ideal world. This paper reports on the

interviewees' comments related to their ideal world view *and* the role of interpreting services in such an ideal world. Understanding how people wish to shape and organize their ideal reality allows us to better frame how this aligns or contrasts with the current reality.

Based on the analysis workflow described earlier, four global thematic categories were distinguished:

- (1) the ideal world
- (2) reason(s) why an interpreter is needed
- (3) alternatives for sign language interpreting services
- (4) views about communication.

*An ideal world is free of barriers and of interpreters*

When describing their ideal world, the deaf participants primarily focused on linguistic access through direct communication. They emphasized that in an ideal world information would be readily available in the language and modality of their choice and that direct communication would be the norm. For Eric this meant that everyone knows sign language and that information is readily available in VGT and in written Dutch:

Everything that is available in spoken language is translated. Yes. In sign language, definitely. And also in text. Yes, both. That is my preference, both.

Both Lissa and Adam, who are younger participants, mentioned that a flexible use of linguistic and semiotic resources allowing language accommodation would make for an ideal world for all individuals. They both stressed the importance of direct communication and the fact that this can be obtained by tapping into various languages and modalities (see also section 3). Lissa expressed this as follows:

Direct communication. A doctor who can sign. But it can be flexible. Maybe the person cannot sign but can easily switch to written communication. Or something else that allows direct communication.

In addition to the topic of access to information and communication, the deaf participants also expanded on deaf people's position in society. They stated that in an ideal world deaf people would be equal to hearing people, that there would be (more) deaf political leaders, and that deaf people would oversee policies that directly affect deaf people's lives. This idea of self-governance and the issue of hearing-centered policymaking were recurrent themes throughout the interviews with the deaf participants. In that respect they introduced the idea of equity and the desire to be treated equitably with hearing people (Harris and Bamford 2001, 971-972), the concept of self-governance on the macro-level (Esmark and Triantafillou 2009; Attfield 2013; Turner and Napier 2014), and civil, social, and political aspects of citizenship for deaf people (Emery, 2006). This is exemplified by the following quote taken from the interview with Lissa:

It would be more balanced: there would be deaf and hearing leaders. And deaf people would decide about "deaf" topics. (...) So, in politics deaf people would have their say in all general matters but when it concerns deaf people, deaf topics, then deaf leaders decide.

As the deaf participants envisioned that in an ideal world direct communication would be the norm, there would be no need for interpreting services, as stated by Lissa:

*Are there still Flemish Sign Language interpreters in your dream world?*

Oh no! Using interpreters? No, thank you. There would be direct communication.

The deaf interviewees also equated a barrier-free world with an interpreter-free world. If the ideal world does not hold any barriers, interpreters are not needed, as Adam pointed out:

*And an interpreter is not needed in your ideal society?*

No. There are no barriers.

In line with the deaf interviewees, the four hearing interpreter participants considered an ideal world to be an environment where direct communication would be the norm. They also stated that in such a society sign language interpreters would not be needed in encounters between deaf and hearing people. Their comments were not limited to how communication would be organized in a world without linguistic barriers, but also considered the current reality where interpreters are still needed (see section 2). As such, they reflected on the current limitations and disadvantages of sign language interpreting services. Anna, for instance, mentions the following:

No matter how you look at it, an interpreter will always be an intermediary. An interpreter does not provide *the* accessibility for deaf people. And yes, we are a certain means to make something accessible (...) but we are not the solution. And using an interpreter of course has many disadvantages.

*Such as?*

Meaning that there is always an extra person to the conversation, who has their own background, or ideas, or yes, their own lives and this influences the situation. Because. Neutrality, that is impossible.

She goes on to state that no one (not deaf, nor hearing people) wants to communicate through an intermediate (see Pöchhacker 2019):

I think if you ask people “Would you rather do it without an interpreter? Just ... direct?” that they will all reply “Yes”. Nobody will say “Oh I am really looking forward to the interpreter being there because it is so much fun.”.

All hearing interpreters agreed that in an ideal world their services would no longer be required. Anna and Emily entertained this idea as a possibility and reflected on what this might mean for themselves, being interpreters.

So, I think that there would be no interpreters in an ideal world. Of course that would be a pity. For yourself as an interpreter that is a pity. Because it is a wonderful job and you love your job. But you are also aware that you are not the ideal solution when it comes to accessibility. (Anna)

We would be totally and utterly useless if there would be no issues between the two parties. (...) But if there would be something else, maybe not VGT but another common language, direct communication, then we would be obsolete. And that makes total sense to me. It does not keep me awake at night. This is now my profession and I try to be as good as possible at my job. But as soon as I am told “you are no longer needed”, then I am no longer needed, and I will do something else. (Emily)



The first thematic category can be summarized as *the ideal world does not have barriers and therefore no interpreters*. All interviewees pointed to inaccessibility of information and/or communication as barriers that would not exist in an ideal world. In the current non-ideal reality these can be redeemed by interpreting services to some extent. However, the interviewees agreed that having interpreting services in place does not lead to a barrier-free world, as these services have disadvantages and limitations. Overall, the responses echo the idea put forward by Pöchhacker (2019) that interpreters are needed but not necessarily wanted. This brings to mind the idea that sign language interpreters are uninvited guests (Sheneman 2020) and a “persistent and not transient experience” in deaf people’s lives (Young et al. 2019). However, the deaf interviewees did not report that interpreters were unwanted or uninvited, and the hearing interpreters did not feel unwanted in situations where their services are requested. The deaf participants and interpreters agreed that interpreting services are not the preferred way to access communication, information, and services in a variety of contexts. Moreover, the deaf interviewees mentioned that in order to obtain inclusion of deaf people in society more is required than linguistic access and in doing so referred to prerequisites for self-governance and deaf citizenship.

### *Interpreters are needed*

Discussing the role of interpreting services in an ideal world brought up the fact that in the current reality interpreters are needed. The participants expanded on reasons why this is the case, offering several dependency arguments.

The deaf participants indicated that an interpreter is currently needed in situations where direct communication between people is not possible (see Young et al. 2019). In these encounters, there is an issue that can be resolved by calling on interpreting services. Adam in this respect

clarified that “When there is no sign language there are barriers, and these can be resolved by bringing in an interpreter.” and referred to interpreters functioning as a bridge:

An interpreter is a person who joins the conversation. Who functions as a bridge between two people who do not have access to each other. The interpreter is that bridge.

Lissa and Adam emphasized that in their interactions with hearing non-signers an interpreter is needed because the other party does not know sign language, attributing the need for interpreting services to the hearing person’s non-signing status. Eric indicated that an interpreter is needed when he wants to communicate with hearing non-signers, relating the necessity to his inability to hear and speak. He did not explicitly mention the reciprocal necessity related to the hearing person’s inability to sign. He also indicated that for in-depth and technical conversations with hearing people who have a basic knowledge of sign language an interpreter would still be required. This is in line with Emery (2006)’s findings regarding deaf people’s contact with the police forces. Whereas his participants found it acceptable that a police officer would use sign language and communicate directly with deaf people to engage socially or discuss general topics, some felt that for formal communication “it is vital that a qualified interpreter is used unless the police officer is able to use sign language at the same level of competence.” (90).

In addition to interactions between signers and non- signers, Eric and Adam mentioned that there would be a need for (sign language to sign language) interpreters in multilingual instances where different signed languages are used.

The hearing interpreter participants stated that their services are requested when people who do not share a common language want to communicate with each other. They highlighted that they are there for the signing (most commonly deaf) and non-signing (most commonly hearing)

party. Anna referred to the metaphor of being a link: “I ensure, or I am a link in the communication between a hearing party, which can be one person or several, and a deaf party, again one person or several.”.

Olivia, Charlotte and Emily also considered, in line with Eric and Adam, interpreters still being needed in multilingual and/or multimodal situations where multiple spoken and/or signed languages are used. Any encounter where interactants (deaf - deaf; hearing - hearing; deaf - hearing) do not have a shared language warrants the need for an interpreter.

A difference should be noted in how in the previous section, when participants described their ideal world, they referred to the need for interpreters in relation to overcoming issues of access. Whereas, later during the interview, participants elaborated on multilingual and potentially multimodal encounters where interpreters would still be necessary to overcome linguistic barriers. The interviewees differentiated between *interpreters providing institutional access* and *interpreters providing linguistic services*. In the first instance an interpreter is needed in interactions between deaf signers and hearing non-signers who are part of a certain institution (for instance, service providers, governments). In the second context, interpreting services are provided for people who want to (socially) interact with each other but do not share a common signed or spoken language. Probably this distinction is related to (perceived) power dynamics between the interactants, but this was not further explored in the interviews.

Additionally, considering the dependency arguments provided and the reasons why interpreters are (and would be) needed, the concept of ‘fractious interdependence’ (Napier 2002a, Napier 2002b, Napier & Leeson 2016, Gile & Napier 2020) comes to mind. This mutual and fractious dependency is commonly attributed to the relationship between deaf people and hearing interpreters (Napier 2002a, 33; Napier 2002b, 142; Napier & Leeson 2016, 219; Gile & Napier 2020, 65). However, the participants in this study, except Eric, found the interdependent relationship to concern all parties in the interaction and not only the deaf people and hearing

interpreters. As the previous section demonstrated, this relationship between the interactant(s) is perceived as complex and at times fractious.

In summary, the second thematic category resulted in *reasons why interpreters are currently needed* and would potentially still be needed in an ideal world. All participants agreed that sign language interpreting services are needed to enable communication between people and to access services when direct communication is not possible. This corresponds to De Meulder and Haualand's (2021) remark that sign language interpreters do not only provide a service but also make other services accessible (20). Participants referred to various interactions where a sign language interpreter is needed because people do not share a language. First, in line with Young et al (2019), all participants agreed that a sign language interpreter is needed for (in-depth) communication between a deaf signer and a hearing non-signer. For all interviewees, except Eric, this need is mutual, i.e., the deaf signer and hearing non-signer both require interpreting services. A point of view that is supported by Brunson (2015) who states that "The sign language interpreter deals with the commodity of access" (136) and that sign language interpreter (services) exist because signing deaf people and hearing non-signers want to engage with each other (135). Secondly, the participants in this study pointed to instances that would still require an interpreter, even if all people involved know (a) sign language. These included situations where different signed languages are used, multilingual and multimodal events, and instances where an in-depth and technical conversation needs to be had with a hearing person who is not a highly skilled signer.

### *Communication through brainwaves*

When considering how access to communication, information, and services for deaf signers would be provided in the ideal world, the interviewees shared alternatives for sign language interpreting services.

All participants agreed that direct communication would be the best alternative for interpreting services. They envisioned people having a full range of linguistic resources and being able to accommodate their language use according to the situation and communication partner. This would lead to language-concordant services in the preferred language(s) of the people included in the interaction. All participants put forward that ideally multilingualism should be promoted from an early age on in education and that all children should learn several languages, including sign languages and, for instance, tactile language as to be able to engage with people who are deafblind.

Overall, all interviewees - except Eric - were convinced that hearing people can acquire sign language. They pointed out that the mere existence of hearing interpreters who are new signers is proof that this is possible. Brunson (2015, 135) mentions that interpreters are professionals because they have a certain expertise a layperson (in this case a hearing non-signer) is without. However, in the case of hearing sign language interpreters, the professional is the proof that a layperson can gain that expertise.

Still, not all participants were fully confident that an ideal world where everyone knows sign language or acquires a multitude of linguistic resources is a realistic aspiration. In those instances, as reported in section 2, they indicated that interpreters would still be needed.

Additionally, the deaf participants saw alternate solutions in technological advances but emphasized that technological ways to enable communication should not outweigh human and direct communication. Lissa imagined that in the future it would be possible to receive translations of spoken messages into a written or signed language through wearables. Eric, referring to the current reality and stating that it might be impossible for everyone to learn sign language, offered that the second-best option is to be found in technology. He referred to holographic teleportation of a sign language interpreter as a possible technological solution:

Secondly it would be really good if you could always request an interpreter, immediately, who will interpret. All the time. You just push a button, and the interpreter appears, real time and real life, next to you. (...) I have visited a company who develops this. I think the name was teleport or something like that.

Adam and Charlotte felt that the only solution to ensure true universal communication allowing full inclusion of all people is communication via brainwaves:

If we consider the highest level of universal communication then this is reading minds, communication through brainwaves. Communication without barriers, transcending that level. (Adam)

The third thematic category results in *alternatives for sign language interpreting services*. These included (1) direct communication where people adopt various multilingual and multimodal linguistic and semiotic resources in their interactions (Kusters 2017; De Meulder and Haualand 2021; Moriarity Harrelson 2019; Tapio 2019), (2) language-concordant services where interactants use the same language (Reagan 2010; De Meulder 2016; De Meulder and Haualand 2021), (3) technological solutions, and (4) neurological approaches (brainwaves). The deaf participants emphasized that it would be important for people to be able to accommodate to language practices in a flexible way. This ties in with De Meulder and Haualand's (2021) observation that the diversity and complexity of communication and language practices has its implications for how (deaf) people envision the ideal organization of communication and, additionally, access to communication, information, and services.

*Communication as if there is no interpreter*

In addition to how participants envision an ideal world they expressed their views on communication. As the thematical analysis of the previous themes demonstrated, all participants value direct communication. Additionally, most of them insisted that mediated communication with an interpreter should resemble direct communication, i.e., as if the interpreter is not there. However, what this means differed for the deaf participants and the hearing interpreters.

Eric had, again, a slightly different opinion compared to the other deaf interviewees. He stated that an interpreter will interpret the communication but that he does not expect this to be an exact representation of who he is. As the interpreters he works with are higher educated and more proficient in Dutch than he is, he assumes that this will influence hearing people's perception of him in a positive way.

Lissa and Adam expect mediated interactions to resemble unmediated conversations when it comes to rapport building, linguistic repertoires, and aspects such as pragmatic force, register, and communication style. They expressed that they want accurate representation of the deaf and hearing person through the interpreter so that the experience resembles a situation of direct communication. Lissa commented that:

The interpreter is my voice. It is my Dutch. The interpreter decides which Dutch words she will use, which sentences, jargon, the interpreter decides everything. I expect that those choices resemble my language, my written language. How it would be if I was the one speaking.

Both Lissa and Adam indicated that for them to have agency in an interpreter-mediated interaction extra labor<sup>8</sup> from themselves and the interpreter is required. Before an assignment this results in thorough preparation, briefing the interpreter about the goal of the conversation,

providing terminology, and discussing which interpreting style would be appropriate. During the conversation they expect the interpreter to clearly render the hearing person's pragmatic intent.

The hearing interpreters in this study assumed that deaf people expect for an interpreted event to closely resemble an unmediated event. However, they had different opinions on how this could be achieved. Anna and Charlotte would limit their agency and adopt a more conduit-like model of interpreting (Solow 1981):

I think that is the expectation deaf people have of an interpreter. Complete and correct and accurate. "There, this is the chunk of information, there you go."

*How it would be if there was no interpreter?*

Yes. So, in fact interpreted communication as if there was no interpreter. (Anna)

In that situation I am really a conduit, I just pass on. Because. If in another situation there would be a power differential and there is no interpreter in that situation, then it should not be restored by the interpreter. It is absolutely not up to the interpreter to balance it out. Even if it makes you uncomfortable. You should just let it happen.  
(Charlotte)

For Emily, interpreting entails a lot more than only rendering the linguistic message. She refers to rendering the 'whole package' which entails elements such as affect, pragmatic force, style, and the speaker's or signer's personality:

What is communication? It is not only the language but the whole package. I find it very important that the whole package is rendered.



This idea echoes a more cognitive model of interpreting (Wilcox and Shaffer 2005) and is also the approach Olivia favors. She agrees that interpreter-mediated communication should resemble direct communication but points out that this in fact allows the interpreter to have more agency. In her opinion, the interpreter unpacks the message and manages the communication, since these aspects are part of any communication process:

Because as an interpreter you should render the whole (...) So that is definitely part of interpreting. If both parties were hearing or they are both deaf, communication would also entail: “wat does the person mean?”, “did I understand it correctly?”. You also do this during regular communication. Maybe I am more aware as an interpreter and maybe I listen more attentively. But it is the same in everyday communication. Like what just happened between us. When you said, “oh no I was thinking of something entirely different.” A short check: are we on the same, ah no, we interpreted it wrong. I think this is a typical characteristic of communication. As an interpreter you do it even more because you must try and interpret the message as accurately as possible.

All interpreters mentioned that, even though interpreting service users might expect that an interpreted event closely resembles and yields the same results as direct communication, this is nearly impossible. Emily, for instance, acknowledges that rendering the whole package is “strenuous” and “at times impossible”. Anna in that respect shared that “an interpretation will always be an interpretation” since “we cannot access the head of the speaker or signer”.

The fourth and final thematic category can be summarized as *views about communication*. Analysis revealed that direct communication is favored and that in instances where this is not possible and an interpreter is needed, the participants’ expectation (except for Eric) is that

interpreted communication resembles direct communication. The other two deaf interviewees acknowledged that for interpreted communication to resemble direct communication extra labor from the deaf person and the interpreter is required. The interpreters understood that a certain interpreting approach is needed if one wants to achieve a resemblance of direct communication within a mediated situation. However, they had differing views on how this could be achieved. Some would limit their agency and adopt a conduit-like model of interpreting (Solow 1981), and others would adopt a cognitive model of interpreting (Wilcox and Shaffer 2005).

### ***Conclusion***

This paper set out to explore whether sign language interpreting services are the ideal and preferred solution to provide access to communication, information, and services for deaf signers. For this purpose, a small number of deaf participants (3) and hearing sign language interpreters (4) with a specific profile from Belgium (Flanders) were interviewed. They were invited to share how they would shape their ideal world and how this aligns with or contrasts to the current reality. The results offer insights pertaining to the following four categories: (1) an ideal world is free of barriers and of interpreters; (2) reasons why interpreters are needed; (3) alternatives to sign language interpreting services, and (4) views about communication.

One of the main findings is that an ideal world is a barrier-free world and as such interpreter-free, but that interpreting services do not lead to a barrier-free world. All participants pointed out that interpreting services in and of themselves have disadvantages and limitations and might create or uphold barriers. Additionally, some interviewees stated that it is not the role (or responsibility) of interpreters to remove existing barriers such as power differentials. This led to the conclusion that an ideal world would be barrier-free and that there would be no sign language interpreting services, as they would not be needed. Consequently, the idea of

interdependence between all interactants was mentioned by most participants, which they considered to be a complex and at times fractious (Napier 2002a, Napier 2002b, Napier & Leeson 2016, Gile & Napier 2020) relationship. This dependency was furthermore perceived as shared, contextual, and fractional as it arises in specific contexts, for a specific purpose and within a specific timeframe.

Additionally, most deaf participants and all hearing sign language interpreters in this study expressed that they expect interpreter-mediated interactions to match the norms, standards, and results of direct communication. In other words, direct communication should be achieved through sign language interpreting services. This raises questions as to what the (perceived) norms of direct communication are, how deaf signers and sign language interpreters view direct and indirect communication, and most importantly why interpreted contexts should resemble unmediated contexts. This topic requires further attention.

Overall, the participants<sup>9</sup> agreed that in an ideal world linguistic access and communication should be readily available to and for everyone. The participants expressed that in an ideal world direct communication via language concordant services would be the norm. This is preferred over interpreted encounters which, as mentioned, hold their own limitations and disadvantages. Notably, the views and opinions reported here are those of what we can consider to be elite stakeholders. In this respect it would be of great interest to engage with a wider group of participants with different and differing profiles. Additional studies on the topic including participants with a more diverse background (such as for instance deaf interpreters, deaf signers who only occasionally work with interpreters, and a broader sample of hearing interpreters) would be helpful to increase our understanding of the topic. Moreover, it would be of interest to conduct a similar study in other countries or regions where access for deaf people is organized differently in comparison to Flanders. Such larger scale and transnational studies could help to confirm or refute the current study's findings.

The findings on the one hand corroborate that the provision of sign language interpreting services is not the sole or preferred solution to gain access to communication, information, and services (De Meulder and Haualand 2021). However, as demonstrated in the introduction, there is an international trend to focus on and “to favor giving access to services through sign language interpreters instead of via language-concordant services” (De Meulder and Haualand 2021, 21) when demanding and creating access for deaf signers. Although advocacy work, as for instance the WFD Charter, mentions both language concordant services or/and sign language interpreting services as measures that can help to obtain access for and inclusion of deaf signers, current policies do not allow contextual language and modality choices for deaf signers (De Meulder and Haualand 2021, 23). All participants in this study agreed that to achieve inclusion a model that reflects such contextual language choices needs to be in place. On the other hand, the study also confirms that sign language interpreting services create and maintain the illusion of inclusion (Russell 2007; Russell and Winston 2014; De Meulder and Haualand 2021). One of the issues lies in the fact that policies and ideologies tend to equate access with inclusion (cf. the focus on sign language interpreting services during the pandemic). This surpasses the fact that inclusion entails much more than providing linguistic access and that (deaf) people have different aspirations and expectations when it comes to inclusion and full participation in society. In this respect the deaf interviewees mentioned equity (Harris and Bamford 2001, 971-972), self-governance (Esmark and Triantafillou 2009; Attfield 2013; Turner and Napier 2014), and aspects of deaf citizenship (Emery, 2006) as important aspects of inclusion.

The insights gained from the research presented here and future studies could help inform policies providing access to communication, information, and services for deaf signers. As such the results can support advocacy work that (re)directs the focus and resources to put policies in place that consider deaf people’s contextual language choices (De Meulder and

Haualand 2021). The findings can also enhance our understanding of what the merits and limitations of sign language interpreting services are, and provide ways to ensure that when sign language interpreting services are requested and provided, they are - within that context - the preferred accommodation.

### ***Funding information***

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<sup>1</sup> Internationally, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) represents deaf signers and works "to ensure equal rights for 70 million deaf people around the globe". See <https://wfdeaf.org/our-work/>.

<sup>2</sup> In this context the Charter refers to bilingual education (signed and written languages) provided by teachers who master sign language at a near-native fluency level.

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/liamodelluk/status/1259513595681017862?s=21>

<sup>4</sup> England's campaign #WhereIsTheInterpreter: <https://whereistheinterpreter.com>

<sup>5</sup> "becoming HEARING" is the lived experience of a hearing person who, on entering the Deaf-World cultural context, is labelled by deaf people with the sign TO-HEAR to denote that she is different from them, i.e., not deaf (Subak 2016, 8; AUTHOR 2021).

<sup>6</sup> In 2008, the KU Leuven added VGT to its bachelor's program in Applied Language Studies. The program consists of a three-year bachelor training in Applied Linguistics (of which VGT is one of the languages in addition to Dutch and a spoken language of choice) followed by a one-year master in consecutive interpreting between Dutch - VGT and between Dutch and a spoken language of choice. Those students who wish to become professional VGT interpreters are required to consequently complete the postgraduate program in VGT-Dutch/ Dutch-VGT interpreting during which they acquire simultaneous interpreting skills.

<sup>7</sup> ELAN is the Eudico Linguistic Annotator, a multimedia annotation tool developed at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Crasborn and Sloetjes, 2008) Retrieved from <https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>

<sup>8</sup> Brunson (2011, 138) defines labor as "this mostly invisible work is both a product of an inaccessible society and a dependence on another person for access".

<sup>9</sup> Eric had on several occasions a slightly different opinion. As he was older than the other participants, this could be attributed to a generational difference.