

ELSA TAMEZ

## **THE BIBLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE DEAF COMMUNITY: A Costa Rican Experience**

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In many countries in Latin America there has been an explosion of sign languages in recent years. They are emerging and becoming stronger. Governments from different countries, in response to the pressure from associations of Deaf people, are beginning to recognize the sign language of their own country as the official language of their Deaf community. In Costa Rica the official sign language is called “LESCO,” a Spanish acronym for Costa Rican Sign Language. The viability of any sign language is enhanced when the Deaf community engages in promoting and teaching it among new generations, and even among the hearing society. This is the case in many countries in Latin America, including Costa Rica, a small country with a Deaf population of approximately 26,000.

Little by little the hearing society is becoming aware of the presence of Deaf people due to the fact that this population has burst into society claiming to be a culture with its own identity and language. They are asking to be respected. Ignorance about the Deaf community is very common. Just a brief contact with the world of Deaf people is enough to become aware of the lack of sensitivity that we, hearing people, exhibit toward Deaf people. For example, there are more than a few hearing people who think that Deaf people are also dumb, that they are deaf-mute. This is a very irritating term for Deaf people since they have all their vocal cords. Many myths are created about them: people think that they are idiots, unable to work or to study. But reality is totally different; they can be as smart as any hearing person given the proper conditions and circumstances.

Information often unknown to hearing people includes the following:

“The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organization representing approximately 70 million Deaf people worldwide. . . . WFD uses special, legal or administrative measures to ensure that Deaf people in every country have the right to preserve their own sign languages, organizations, and cultural and other activities. Most important among WFD priorities are Deaf people in developing countries; the right to sign language; and equal opportunity in all spheres of life, including access to education and information.” (From [www.wfdeaf.org](http://www.wfdeaf.org))

The Deaf community doesn’t see deafness as a disability, but a condition that allows them to build a community with identity, culture, and language of their own.

Each country has its own distinct sign language/s.

Deaf associations and organizations often plan national and international meetings for adults and youth in which they share their experiences and discuss their needs and aspirations.

For several years symposiums on Sign Language have been held organized by linguists interested in analyzing sign language morphology, syntaxes, phonemes, semantics, etc.

There are universities for Deaf people where all staff and students are deaf (Gallaudet University), churches only for Deaf people, and soccer championships among Deaf people.

There are many websites for Deaf people where they interact, express their feelings, and support each other.

There are digital libraries in sign language (i.e., [www.cervantesvirtual.com](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com)).

We hope that this lack of knowledge among hearing people will change when the presence of Deaf people becomes more and more visible and when we, hearing people, become more sensitive to Deaf people's feelings. These words of Aminah Davids of South Africa, from her poem "*La sordera es como tener oídos ciegos*" ([www.workersforjesus.com/dfi/594spn.htm](http://www.workersforjesus.com/dfi/594spn.htm)) are very eloquent regarding Deaf people's feelings: "There is a problem: the vastness of the hearing world, leaving us a very lonely road to walk."

In this paper we will share what we have learned about the Deaf community and its relationship with the hearing community; the process we adopted; the stages we followed; the unique elements and difficulties of translating sign language; and some recommendations.

### **The Bible from the perspective of the Deaf community**

The Bible makes sense for people and communities when they understand and read it from their own situation, needs, and dreams.

For a long time Deaf people have lived with loneliness beginning in childhood because of difficulty with communication. This loneliness and feeling of being misunderstood can be seen in their poems and writings. The following poem by a young Deaf Argentinian woman shows this:

#### **I need understanding**

I lack being understood  
I don't know if it is my silence  
or my different form of communication  
that sometimes makes people not show themselves as they are

There is no understanding  
when I feel pain  
when I am down  
lost in life

I only need someone  
to honestly understand me  
so I can have hope  
to overcome pain

There is no understanding  
I want to stop thinking negatively  
so we can begin changing  
the way we live together

There is no understanding  
when you struggle  
towards your goals  
and you are not accepted  
by others

Only those that know  
the world I live in  
understand me. . . .

Anonymous ([www.sitiodesordos.com.ar](http://www.sitiodesordos.com.ar))

Deaf people feel excluded from hearing society. In fact, access to information, technology, jobs, education, health, religion, sports, etc., is available almost exclusively for the hearing society.

Many times when Deaf children grow up in hearing families and are forcibly integrated into schools to interact with hearing children, they feel lost and their self-esteem goes down considerably. They believe they are unable to reach goals set for them and often quit school. This testimony of a little girl is one of many:

They (the teachers) didn't realize that many times I didn't know what I had to do because I was not able to hear [ . . . ] I had to study a lot and often I didn't understand anything. Sometimes I asked them but they didn't understand me. When the teacher was speaking I didn't understand at all because she spoke too much and too fast and it was very difficult for me to read lips.

Anaía Villamayor, "Educación Especial—Atención temprana—Diversidad e integración,"  
*Educación Especial*, Boletín No.3, Feb. 2001

This common situation of loneliness among Deaf people has changed rapidly since sign language has been recognized as their natural way of communication. When Deaf people, young and old, meet with each other, they generate a fluid and wonderful communication which causes them deep feelings of joy. For example, in San José, Costa Rica, long ago it became quite common to see a good number of Deaf people of all ages meeting and interacting at the La Plaza de la Cultura. Indeed, a paradigm shift has taken place in all senses. In Costa Rica, the Deaf community has been built little by little since Deaf people have started meeting with each other. To be able to communicate fluidly in a language that is natural to them and to share their own problems, desires, and visions has helped them to find an identity, a culture of their own, and a deep sense of pride.

The Bible as a source of inspiration and empowerment can accompany this process of affirming the Deaf community, not only by means of the biblical texts themselves, but also by reading those texts from the perspective of the Deaf community. The Deaf community has a huge contribution to make to hearing society.

### **Pilot project in LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language)**

In this context of the emergence of sign language, the UBS Americas Area Translation Consultation (AMATCON) has accepted the challenge of producing a modest pilot project: the translation of portions of the Bible into LESCO. One of the reasons is that many people with severe or profound hearing loss, especially the poor, don't know Spanish and have serious problems with reading and writing. This is not the only problem. In this process of the Deaf community's self-affirmation, they need to read the Bible as a source of empowerment. The Deaf community needs to appropriate the

Scriptures for themselves and interpret them from their own reality. The pilot project addressed these two issues: the translation of some Bible selections and a comment about each of them from the perspective of the Deaf community. All these were prepared by a team of Deaf translators.

During 2005 and 2006, we produced a DVD with four biblical portions from the Gospel of Luke: the birth of Jesus and three parables. In addition to the translation of the biblical texts, we included an introduction of two themes. The first is about the Deaf community and its relationship with the Bible; the second introduces the context of the biblical text, in order to explain the narratives geographically and historically. We also introduced some new biblical signs that will appear later in the translation of the texts. At the end of each Bible story we presented a five- to seven-minute commentary. This commentary highlights some important points of the narrative and relates them to the Deaf community's situation. Each section finishes with a prayer of gratitude for God's Word. Included in the DVD are subtitles and audio in Spanish for the relatives of Deaf people and for hearing people who have a ministry with the Deaf. We included this so that they can listen to the Bible and gain a better understanding of the Deaf community's perspective. Our Deaf translators felt it was important to include subtitles so that Deaf people could also improve their reading and writing.

Deaf people translated, commented, and signed, as well as scripted and directed the DVD. Prior to the professional production, a home video was presented to the LESCO National Committee to approve the new signs. Later, the final draft of the home video was presented to Deaf people representing different churches.

### **Particularities and examples from the LESCO translation**

- a. *The LESCO translation and all other sign language translations require the decoding of the morphosyntactic discourse before translating the text into sign language.* According to our coordinator, Christian Ramírez, we first have to clearly understand the main ideas from the morphosyntactic level. After this we must visualize the content including places and orientations in a step-by-step order. This is the cognitive level. In this level it is important to sketch the scenes in order to visualize them. As we all know, we have to add implied information. This step is very important for understanding the meaning. In the third level, the second level emerges: this is the sign language translation. For instance: to translate the phrase "All went to their own towns to be registered" (Luke 2.3) into LESCO, the signer has to visualize different communities and different families registering in these communities. In addition, it is important to include a negative statement to help them better grasp the corresponding positive; i.e., it is important to say that a person who belongs to a certain place, cannot be registered in another place but only in the birthplace of his ancestors. For this reason, in Luke 2.5 it was necessary to add that Joseph couldn't be registered in Nazareth. This resulted in the LESCO translation being longer than the Spanish audio translation. This created some difficulties in matching the audio and the subtitles with the signing. It is

not appropriate to do a tight translation even if it is clear because it would not be acceptable to hearing people.

In another example: when two rulers, like Augustus and Quirinius, appear at the same time, it should be clear that one is over the other, otherwise it is confusing. In Luke 2.2 Caesar Augustus, the emperor, gives an order to prepare a census. Quirinius, the ruler of Syria, was responsible for managing the census in Palestine. In the LESCO translation it was important to add that Augustus was over Quirinius.

- b. *Maps and images.* Since visual placement is fundamental, maps and images are necessary. It was essential in the translation of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.1-20) to show maps of the Roman Empire, Syria, and Palestine. It was also important to visually display Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem through Jerusalem. It was most important to show the face of Caesar Augustus wearing his laurel wreath, since the sign for Caesar is simply a figure wearing a laurel wreath.
- c. *Translation of text talking about ears.* A literal translation of this verse: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luke 8.8) is not appropriate for the Deaf community; it is difficult to understand and it can easily be misunderstood. Deaf people have "ears to hear" but they cannot hear. Our LESCO team translated as follows: "If you want to understand, understand!"
- d. *Rhetorical questions.* In LESCO, facial gestures and body communication are used together with hand signs. Many manual signs are ultimately defined by facial and body gestures since a sign can represent different meanings. Therefore rhetorical questions were easy to translate because both facial and manual gestures were part of the translation. See, for example, Luke 18.8: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The rhetorical aspect of the question is easily understood because of the gestures.
- e. *Son of Man.* It was impossible to translate the expression "Son of Man." The son-man sign simply means "male child." The LESCO team opted for an interpretation of the term and translated it "Jesus."
- f. *Repetition.* It seems that people who communicate in LESCO need to see the signs repeated to confirm their comprehension. This occurs in our video. In the commentaries of the biblical stories, translators felt it necessary to review details of the story before they related its meaning with the Deaf community. This fact was confirmed when a draft of the video was presented to Deaf representatives from different churches. They reaffirmed the importance of the repetition when it was questioned by a hearing person. I am unsure if repetition is as important in other sign languages.

### **Procedures in the development of the translation project and DVD production**

We believe that we are pioneering biblical sign language translation in Latin America. It was very helpful to learn from projects on sign language translation

in Australia and the United States. However, we discovered that many elements particular to each Deaf community must be taken into consideration. For instance, it is recommended that local National Associations of Deaf people be contacted prior to the beginning of all sign language translation projects. Since Costa Rica's Sign Language is new and they are trying to bring stability to it, no organization is permitted to create new signs. New signs can only be created by the Deaf community and regulated by a National Committee. I would like to share the procedure we followed, hoping that it will be helpful to those Bible Societies that are interested in sign language translation.

A team of six people—four deaf and two hearing—was formed. The hearing people were not translators. They were the interpreter (LESCO-Spanish) and the translation consultant. These are the steps we followed:

- a. *Study of the biblical text.* The team studied the text in its historical and literary context. It was analyzed collectively. In this step the team began to perceive the difficulties of some terminology for the translation into LESCO and the need for some new signs. The translation consultant and the interpreter (LESCO-Spanish-LESCO), participated in the text study.
- b. *Deaf community perspective.* After the study of the text, the team reflected on the relevance of the text for the Deaf community. They chose the most important aspects for the commentary that they had to prepare from the perspective of the Deaf community. In this step the consultant participated as an observer only.
- c. *Translation.* In this stage, only the Deaf members of the team participated in the translation of the text. The coordinator met the translation consultant for exegetical questions. The coordinator prepared the commentaries after having discussed them with the members of the team and with other people of the Deaf community.
- d. *Preparation of the signer models and a "home video."* After the translation of each biblical story, the coordinator prepared a signer model. He used schemas to facilitate the memorization. The signer learned the translation by heart. If the text was too long he memorized it by paragraphs. After the signer was ready, the coordinator filmed the translation and prepared a "home video."
- e. *LESCO translation review.* The whole team analyzed the translation on the "home video." The interpreter back-translated from LESCO into Spanish for the translation consultant.
- f. *New filming with corrections.* Deaf members of the team worked on the corrections and suggestions. The coordinator filmed the translation again and prepared another "home video."
- g. *Second filming review.* The translation consultant checked the second filming with the help of the back-translation of the interpreter.
- h. *Presentation of the "home video" to the National Committee of LESCO.* The coordinator showed a home video draft to the National Committee of

LESCO. The Committee made some corrections of signs and some important suggestions about the presentation and the commentaries from the Deaf community perspective.

- i. *New filming adding the corrections and suggestions of the National Committee of LESCO.* Again, a new revision of the translation by the translation consultant.
- j. *Presentation of the “home video” to Deaf people from different churches.* A home video was presented in the Costa Rican Bible Society to Deaf representatives from different churches, including representatives of the Christian Committee of the Deaf Association of Costa Rica. The participation was very enthusiastic and everybody made valuable suggestions regarding the form of presentation: clothing and background. Suggestions were incorporated into the professional filming.
- k. *Preparation for professional filming.* At this stage two colours for the background were prepared—light blue and gray; no images. Several different coloured T-shirts were bought for the translator-model signers. The colour coordination and the background were prepared ahead of time. The coordinator prepared the daily script with all the details, including clothing and background.
- l. *Professional filming.* A professional team was hired. They filmed every morning for five days. It was a new situation for the translators: standing under bright lights and in front of several cameras was not easy for them. Due to their nervousness, some of the signers forgot the text and had to repeat the scene again and again. The translation consultant was watching the film in a separate room to review the translation, with the help of the back-translation done by the interpreter. Before each recording the whole team was very attentive to the appearance of the model signers. Signer translators had to be neat in appearance: no jewelry, hair combed, faces made up, T-shirts well ironed, no shiny buttons, and so on.
- m. *Translation into Spanish for the audio.* The translation of LESCO into Spanish had to be ready and recorded before the final edition of the professional filming. In this stage the participation of the translation consultant was also very important.
- n. *Final editing.* The coordinator, the interpreter, and the translation consultant participated in this stage. Most important was the participation of the coordinator as he was a Deaf person. He told the editor about appropriate lighting, timing of fade-ins on signers, titles, and so on. At this stage, the participation of the interpreter is very important because the coordinator communicated with the editor through her. The interpreter also led the editor in matching signs, audio, and subtitles. The translation consultant had to look at the translation again, especially because of the incorporation of the audio and subtitles.
- o. *DVD cover and information.* For the DVD cover (design, color, and information) the opinion of the Deaf team, especially the coordinator, was essential.

## Considerations in translation projects into sign language

There are some characteristics peculiar to translation into sign language, which should be taken into consideration when starting a project of this kind. For example:

- a. *Signer and translation.* The selection of signers is a very important task. In addition to the characteristics of all translation projects in written tongues (sign language as mother tongue and ecclesial, gender, and generation representation), other aspects should also be taken into account, including the qualities of the signer. Since Bible translation in sign language goes together with the signer as a person, his or her looks and personality should be pleasant to the Deaf community, so that the translation is well received. This may mean that signers and translators may sometimes be different people. We might expect that the people who translated the text might be the same people who sign it on-screen but this is not always possible. Sometimes it is necessary to have an on-screen signer who is not a translator but someone who signs on-screen the text prepared by the translators.
- b. *Deaf Associations.* If the Deaf community itself did not ask for a translation project, it is very important to share the project with the association or associations of the Deaf community of the country where the project is located, before beginning any translation project into sign language. At this time of self-affirmation of the different Deaf communities in Latin America, there is much sensitivity to foreign projects coming from the hearing society. This is because they feel used by many religious and secular institutions of the hearing society.
- c. *National Committees of Sign Language.* Some associations have a committee that regulates signs to stabilize the language. Sign languages are very dynamic and changing because they are new in Latin America. Therefore the official institutions of Deaf people are concerned about stabilizing the language. It is important that the National Committee of Sign Language be consulted about new Bible signs. If there is no regulatory committee for new signs, the Deaf Association should be consulted. In this sense the UBS translation project can help in the stabilization of sign language.
- d. *Two different translations.* If the translation team decides to include audio and subtitles, they must prepare two different translations: one is the direct translation to sign language, and the other is the translation of sign language to the language that will be used for audio and subtitles. In our case the team translated from different versions, including Greek into LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language), and from LESCO to Spanish, adapting it to a version valued by the Deaf community.
- e. *Translation consultant's role.* As is seen in the stages that were followed to prepare the DVD, the translation consultant's participation does not finish once the translation is checked. Since the signer has to memorize the translation, there is the risk of it being changed whenever it is filmed again. For this reason the consultant must be attentive, reviewing again and again



every time the translation is filmed. His or her participation isn't finished until the conclusion of the final edition of the professional recording, including audio and subtitles.

### **Final words**

Working on this project has been very meaningful and rewarding on all levels. I am aware that not much has been written about how to start or to work on projects related to Sign Language Bible translation, therefore I wrote this paper to share some of my experiences in this pilot project. I included what we learned about the Deaf community and its relationship with the hearing community, the process we adopted, the stages we followed, the unique elements and difficulties of translating sign language, and some recommendations.

SEPPO SIPILÄ

## **ON TRANSLATING THE BIBLE INTO SIGN LANGUAGES: A Perspective from Finland**

The author is a UBS translation consultant for the Europe-Middle East Region, based in Helsinki, Finland.

### **Introduction: A personal testimony**

I first became interested in the Finnish Sign Language (FSL) more than twenty years ago. A friend of mine suggested that I should start to learn the language, because learning the SL would be great fun. My friend was correct. Learning the basics of FSL turned out to be great. In trying to learn the language, I also became interested in the Deaf community in Finland. Getting to know some Deaf people was an eye-opening experience. I had never before realised that there were people around me who really could not understand any of the spoken languages of Finland. My FSL teacher had a university degree, but she could not grasp, for example, the meaning of standard Christmas carols, simply because of the limitations of her skills in Finnish and in Swedish.

I also learned that members of the Deaf community had great difficulty in understanding the basics of the Christian faith and that they could not really understand the printed Bible. The standard versions used in Finland during the 1980s were simply too complicated for them, much more complicated than the Christmas carols. I began to think, "Would it be possible to have the Bible translated into FSL?"

This story has many features that we can identify when looking at work with SLs on a more general level. However, during the last ten years many things have changed within society, within the field of Bible translation, and within the United Bible Societies (UBS).

### **UBS and Bible translation into SLs**

Surprisingly, many Bible Societies today either work with Deaf communities using SL in their country or are seriously considering working with them. The