

The Sign Language Bible Translation Movement: A Look through the Eyes of *TBT*

The Bible Translator

2021, Vol. 72(2) 146–162

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DOI: 10.1177/20516770211020076

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Abstract

In this article I look at articles in past issues of *The Bible Translator* to note what they say about sign language Bible translation (SLBT) and to highlight areas of particular importance to today's SLBT movement. After a summary and some updates on the history of the movement, I look at the various issues raised in the articles about SLBT work, covering topics such as Deaf identity, issues surrounding sign language, the need for Deaf ownership, setting up SLBT projects, and the process of translation.

Keywords

sign language, Deaf, performance, identity, minority language, language oppression, Bible translation history, video

Introduction

The year 2008 was a watershed year for the growing worldwide sign language Bible translation (SLBT) movement. As momentum built in the larger Bible agencies and Deaf leaders of SLBT projects took first steps toward building a Deaf leadership network, *The Bible Translator* (*TBT*) devoted a whole issue to SL translation. This was followed by articles in 2009 and 2012 advocating for a Korean SL translation. In 2015, once again, SLBT appeared, this time in the contexts of identity and of biblical performance criticism. These and earlier articles in *TBT* through the years provide a framework for viewing the growth of the SLBT movement and the issues surrounding it.

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Sign language Bible translation history

The first starts

TBT's first reference to SLBT is a 1990 article on the American Sign Language (ASL) Bible project initiated by Deaf Missions, called the Omega Project ("Focus on Translators" 1990). The article illustrates the Omega Project's prominence in the field as the first to tackle this important but under-appreciated task, and points back to the beginning of today's SLBT movement. Work began in 1981, with a pilot videotape of Luke 1–3 released in 1982. With no precedents to follow, the article records that "the first years were a time of trial and error" (436) before the Omega Project's official start in 1984. In October 2020, the project celebrated the completion of the ASL Bible—the first complete sign language Bible in the world.

Flying under the *TBT* radar, the next move came from SIL with survey work in Mexican Sign Language in 1988, a pilot project in 1990, and a translation project that became a permanent assignment in 1994. Meanwhile, ViBi (the Japanese Sign Language Bible translation project), following the lead of the Omega Project, officially organized and began work on a Japanese Sign Language (JSL) translation in April 1993, after some years of preparation. They learned from the trials and errors of the early Omega Project years, and some of their own, publishing their first portions in 1995. They now have one-third of the Bible translated. *TBT* picks up the trail again in 2000 and 2002 as the Auslan project of the Australian Bible Society is introduced. In the 2002 article, John Harris gives the formal start for the Auslan project as 1998, though the "some years of research and planning" he mentions likely began as early as 1994, as suggested in conversations with and presentations by Mac Adams and Peter Bonser in 2007. After the start of the Auslan project, interest continued to build slowly, and by the year 2000, more than twenty projects had started, two-thirds of them connected with a local Bible Society. Some projects never gained traction, some finished (a book or a lectionary) and are no longer working, and some continue to this day. By the time of the April 2008 issue of *TBT* dedicated to SLBT, there were a total of some fifty projects with varying levels of viability and results.

Other key historical developments

Though they had offered classes before, in 2002 SIL started their full sign language linguistics track at the University of North Dakota (UND). This led to a steady stream of practitioners working in SLBT, both in SIL and in other organizations. In 2012, SIL established the Global Sign Languages

Team, putting SLBT work at the same level organizationally as the other regionalized areas, firmly establishing it as part of the SIL culture.

Meanwhile, in the United Bible Societies (UBS) fellowship, as more local Bible Societies established SLBT projects, a workgroup was commissioned at the Triennial Translation Workshop in 2006 to study the way forward, leading to meetings in Costa Rica in 2008. Here, Deaf translators and project leaders joined the meeting of UBS translation consultants to give their perspective. After five days of “pre-meetings” to work out a mutually understandable sign language mix, the Deaf participants quickly moved on to build an agenda of their own that the consultants later agreed to adopt when the official meetings began. Out of this grew the first Deaf-led worldwide SLBT advocacy group, the Committee of International Cooperation for Bible Translation in Sign Languages (later renamed BDI—Bible Deaf International).

Others, including SIL, saw the potential of BDI and provided access to funding. With this, BDI planned training workshops and participated in several key workshops in 2009—SIL’s BT 2009, FOBAI’s (Forum of Bible Agencies International) Scripture engagement conference, and UBS’s Triennial Translation Workshop. At the UBS World Assembly in 2010, the BDI leader, Christian Ramirez, was invited to address the whole assembly. He and another from that group also attended FOBAI 2011 in Scotland. Their presence at these various events had its effect, and little by little, the Bible translation world began to take notice.

This was a time of transition in the Bible translation world, though, and with less budget available for infrastructure and capacity building, and without a representative connection to the wide variety of SLBT projects, BDI eventually lost steam. Still, in Asia, APSDA (Asia Pacific Sign Language Development Association) picked up where BDI left off. Deaf leaders of SLBT projects throughout the Asia-Pacific region formed the first Deaf-led umbrella organization in 2011 and incorporated in 2012. APSDA continued to engage with FOBAI, along with SLBT groups that became FOBAI members, like DOOR, Deaf Missions, and the Deaf Bible Society (an independent entity, not a part of the United Bible Societies fellowship). By 2015, Deaf leaders and others involved in SLBT began meeting as the Deaf Development Group (DDG) of FOBAI, giving SLBT leaders a serious voice in the larger Bible translation movement. By 2018, this led to the establishment of regional SLBT project umbrella organizations in Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas. So, although BDI itself did not continue, APSDA did, and APSDA passed on their vision to the other regional umbrella groups that are now beginning. Perhaps, some day, leaders who are now meeting as DDG will form their own organization, bringing full circle what began as the

dream of six Deaf leaders in Costa Rica in 2008—a body able to represent fully SLBT programs around the globe.

Within the UBS fellowship, another movement has recently begun in Latin America. At present, local Bible Societies there have thirteen SL projects operating, many of them quite new. To support them, UBS has developed regional joint training workshops for translation teams, and through these twice-yearly training gatherings, Deaf leadership has emerged to represent the growing movement. On a broader scale, UBS is also developing training programs to help facilitators and interpreters work well with Deaf teams, as well as training translation consultants who wish to consult on SLBT projects.

In the area of technology, several key developments have emerged. Perhaps the oldest is the work of SIL's Steve Parkhurst in developing animation strategies to support the translation work in Spain, which both hides the identity of the translators and allows for the exchange of lexical items that differ by region and by church affiliation. APSDA (with developer Simon Cozens) and the Deaf Bible Society have developed apps for publication of SL Scripture on smartphones. UBS's Nathan Miles and the Deaf Bible Society's Stuart Thiessen have jointly developed software for drafting, editing, and checking video translations using video notes, which is seeing growing use. UBS has also added to their Digital Bible Library the capacity for SLBT video work to be securely uploaded and stored, and thus accessible for sharing with a variety of video-based publication formats. With these two offerings, a seamless route from drafting, through checking and storing, to publishing, is envisioned in the future. The Hungarian SLBT project recently released a web-based publication that includes video footnotes that the viewer can choose to click on and view.

Other key groups presently engaged in SLBT

These are not the only agencies engaged in SLBT. Others that may be able to offer various kinds of help for those seeking to engage in SLBT include the following:

DOOR. Deaf Opportunity OutReach, a ministry dedicated to the training of Deaf leaders and establishing indigenous Deaf churches, began training Deaf leaders in 1997 via a set of chronological stories from the Bible. These were memorized and told for evangelism, discipleship, and leadership training. In 2007, DOOR began recording these as full translations of the Bible passages on video, as an authoritative reference for those using the stories. As of 2020, they have translated their chosen set of 110 passages (roughly 9 percent of the Bible) with introductions and Scripture engagement materials

into twenty-two separate SLs. Two of their projects have gone on to translate other Scripture totaling 24 percent of the Bible. Many independent projects also translate the same set of passages and use DOOR illustrations. DOOR provides consulting for some of these in addition to their own projects.

IMB. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention began sign language translation work in 2005. In partnership with the DeafWay organization, they now have story-based Scriptures in thirteen sign languages worldwide, available on the DeafWay Bible smart-phone app.

Deaf Bible Society. Starting as a branch of Hosanna's "Faith Comes by Hearing" in 2012 with a focus on making worldwide SLBT work available on Hosanna's computer and smartphone apps, Deaf Bible became an independent agency and changed their name to the Deaf Bible Society in 2015. Since then, they have grown into an organization that supports worldwide SLBT work and the infrastructures around it.

Pioneer Bible Translators. With their first Deaf ministry-related staff person in 2013, Pioneer Bible Translators are relative newcomers to the field, but in recent years have poured substantial energy into SLBT work. The 2016 FOBAI meeting run by the Deaf Development Group was a catalyst for expanding their involvement. By 2017, a Deaf person was heading their SLBT department, and today they have ten staff members working in SLBT.

Home for Bible Translators. The Home for Bible Translators, located in Israel, has recently begun hosting study tours for Deaf translation teams and consultants, helping them understand the land and language of the Bible.

4.2.20. The Institute for Biblical Languages and Translation (a program of the 4.2.20 Foundation) now has two workers in Israel focused on the Deaf world, particularly in training translation teams and translation consultants to do SLBT work.

Sign language Bible translation work

Past *TBT* articles offer more than just history. They also present a wealth of information and, taken as a whole, they present a picture of the key issues that face the SLBT movement.

Understanding the need for SLBT

The first major issue facing the SLBT movement is the constant need to help people understand that SLBT is even necessary. As Sipilä (2008) notes, it is not uncommon for people to confuse SLBT with Bibles in Braille. Apart from the obvious ironies, the two tasks are poles apart. Braille is mainly a matter of re-encoding an existing spoken language translation into

a different notation system, whereas sign language entails a completely new translation, not just into another language, but into a language of a different modality with different parameters from spoken languages. Thinking only in a disability framework, as most do when they have no Deaf community contact, it seems obvious that since Deaf people can see, they should be able to read without any difficulty. Of course, not hearing the language, and thus not knowing the language one is learning to read, adds orders of magnitude of difficulty to the task, and because of this, many in the Deaf community struggle with reading a spoken language. But even when they can read well, it is still not their naturally learned language.

Sipilä mentions, as another barrier to understanding the need, the common assumption that signed languages are simply a re-coding of spoken languages. “Hearing people mistakenly think that . . . SL is not a proper language at all, just a Deaf people’s variant of commonly used language, be it English, Spanish, or Finnish” (Sipilä 2008, 68–69). The truth is, the visual modality, with its multiple possible simultaneities, takes signed languages in quite different directions from spoken languages. Bascom’s (2008) article touches on how signed languages are both similar and different from spoken languages from a linguistics perspective. Jeun and Ahn (2009) distinguish between Signed Korean and Korean Sign Language as part of their plea for the importance of engaging in SLBT. After an extended discussion of the differences between the two, they go one step further and encourage us “to think of sign language as one of the minority languages rather than a language for the hearing disabled, or a language to shy away from.” This echoes the cry of the Deaf community. In the words of Uiko Yano, project manager of ViBi (the JSL translation project), “I want the need for a Sign Language Bible to be a given. I want people to understand that it’s 100 percent necessary. I don’t want them to be surprised or confused when they hear about our work. People need to understand that just as those who can hear have their own languages, so do we” (Yano 2017, 03:21–03:38).

Understanding the Deaf community

The importance of Deaf ownership and leadership was a dominant thread throughout the various *TBT* articles in the 2008 issue. Mac Adam, one of two Deaf contributors, gives the clearest call, urging “all SL Bible Translation projects to ensure that the Deaf always have the key role in decision-making” (Adam 2008, 94). Deaf ownership may be obvious, but it is certainly not simple. As Tunbridge (2000) points out, the sociolinguistic situation and Deaf community power structures can be tricky to navigate. This triggers more questions. To whom in the Deaf community should hearing Bible Society leaders listen? The interpreters who share a language with us? Teachers at schools for the Deaf? Deaf people who function well in the

local written/spoken language? How can we know who is Deaf (culturally and linguistically) and who is deaf (audiologically disabled but not part of the signing community) when the community is still working it out? And then how do hard-of-hearing people fit into this mix? Are they accepted as Deaf? As deaf? Do they even want to be? On these crucial questions, hearing people are outsiders, so what do we do when deciding with whom to engage?

Sipilä echoes this concern:

If the hearing population does not know too much about Deaf cultures, the members of a Deaf community face a difficulty in contacting hearing people. The consequence is difficulty in cooperation between translation organizations and Deaf communities and churches. So, how do we find out the needs of Deaf communities, and where do we find suitable candidates for translation teams? (Sipilä 2008, 70)

In the face of these questions, local or regional Deaf-led organizations provide indispensable support.

One more consideration stemming from Tunbridge's article is that, in most situations, only a small percentage of the Deaf community have access to a truly native language (that is, a language learned from infancy)—those who have Deaf parents. This means that in many cases, deaf children with hearing parents are not exposed to any naturally acquirable language until school age, and depending on the philosophy of the school, they may not be exposed to it there either (Tunbridge 2000, 221). Tunbridge's observations are as true today as in 2000, and in the interim, deeper studies into the effects of language deprivation have only exposed in greater detail how desperately needed early language exposure is. In our present worldwide reality, many deaf people are isolated, with no language by which to access anyone, not to mention the living Word. This means that in some countries, advocacy work will be necessary to give deaf people a chance to gather into community and build a language before access is possible.

Tanada (2008), also Deaf, illustrates the importance of Deaf ownership at the international level. In describing the 2007 meetings that eventually led to the formation of APSDA in 2011, he shows the value of larger hearing organizations partnering with Deaf leaders to build Deaf capacity in order to better fulfill both their own mission and that of their Deaf partners. He gives us a look at the meeting that proved to be a turning point for the region, resulting in the formation of APSDA, a Deaf-led movement with Deaf agendas that makes ample room for hearing cooperation and contribution. The desire of the Deaf community coupled with the resources and power of the hearing world, and their mutual trust, continues to bear fruit to this day.

Deaf language

Linguistics

As we turn to the language of the Deaf community, Bascom's (2008) article gives a good basic introduction to linguistic aspects of signed languages that may be new to those whose main work is with spoken languages. Elwolde (2008), approaching from the perspective of specific translation examples, also shows linguistic differences between spoken and signed languages. With the volumes now written in this field, though, individual articles cannot hope to capture the full scope of information needed. One quick summary statement might be that though signed languages are full languages on a par with spoken languages and using the same human linguistic capacities to make meaning, the fundamental difference in modality means that signed languages also function in ways that are different from spoken languages. These differences must be taken into account for good translation work to happen.

Language contact and signing style

Tunbridge notes that translation consultants "need to be aware of the issues surrounding languages in contact. Above all, they need to avoid making a simplistic linguistic analysis of the situation and instead examine carefully the social and political history creating the environment in which the translation takes place" (Tunbridge 2000, 224). She goes on to discuss how Deaf people, like many minority language users, may consider their own language inferior to the dominant hearing languages. This means that the kind of signing that churchgoing Deaf people prefer may be closer to the local prestige spoken language, and more difficult for the average Deaf person to understand. This is a further shading of the distinction between "Signed Korean" and "Korean Sign Language" used by Jeun and Ahn (2009). In actual practice, Deaf individuals do not generally choose one or the other—it is usually a matter of being closer to one or the other end of the scale, with those who are able code-switching to fit various communication situations.

One further complication is that in a Deaf community that doesn't have a sign language Bible yet, those Deaf people who have historically continued in church are necessarily the ones who either prefer to use, or are at least willing to struggle with, their local language written Bibles, as this is all they have known of church. Thus, they may expect that the Bible "feels more hearing." After all, it is written about hearing people. Whether or not they fully understand a Bible signed directly from the spoken version, it is how they know God, and "changing it" to a more widely used signing style is sometimes resisted by the Deaf church itself. There may be wide swaths

of the Deaf community, hitherto unreached, that would respond favorably to a church that functioned in their first language, but these are generally not the ones asking for a sign language Bible.

For outsiders, these can be difficult paths to negotiate. As hearing consultants, and even as Deaf consultants from another country, we are certainly in no position to tell the community what kind of signing is “true Deaf.” It is often a matter of clarifying the translation brief, and then depending on robust community comprehension testing sessions to determine whether the target community actually understands the signing. If not, the solution generally involves finding ways to free translators from the words of the majority language texts while clinging to the meaning.

Åsberg also reminds us to respect diversities of approach, pointing out:

The DanishSL version of Acts 2.1-4 is slow and ceremonial while the Swedish version of the same text has an active, narrative, character. The performances differ quite a lot in regard to tempo, facial expressions, gestures, etc. There are things to be said for both sides. Some people prefer a neutral delivery, where the signer avoids all interpretational accents. Others want at least a minimum of feeling and ability to live a part. There seem to exist two (or more) schools of performance. An obvious conclusion is that no single one should be universally prevailing. (Åsberg 2008, 77)

These observations are particularly important in light of a tendency I have noticed for projects or groups of projects to see their own signing style as “true Deaf,” and other projects as “too hearing.” As the various groups interact more frequently in deeper cooperative efforts, this diversity of styles and translation briefs is becoming more accepted.

Identity and performance

Tamez (2015) gives a valuable introduction to one of the deepest issues facing translators—their language is tied to their body and to their person. At some point, a translator must decide to present their face to the world as part of the “font” of their Bible. Indeed, I have witnessed the struggle that sometimes accompanies this major decision in the life of a translator/signer. Elwolde (2008), though not mentioning identity per se, illustrates how this issue affects the final product. Since the face of any one person from one church in the Deaf community as the “face” of the Bible might hinder those from other streams of Christianity from engaging with the translation, the Spanish Sign Language project has chosen a “non-person” (in the form of animation) to circumvent this problem. Another approach to this issue, mentioned by Tamez is:

having the signer dress up in such a way that the particular identity of the signer is hidden and the Deaf identity remains in the performance of the message only. As a result, the signer receives a created identity, presumably neutral. . . . In the case of translation it is creating effects of distance between the particular signer and his or her role as narrator. The public needs to perceive the one who performs the text as an actor and not as a particular Deaf person. (Tamez 2015, 262–63)

Tamez also writes about the intersemiotic nature of translation into sign language, and of the necessity for performance criticism in the process of translation. This was clarified for me in a moment interpreting for a meal in 2009 with James Maxey and the JSL Bible translation project's board chair, Eiji Matsumoto. As we were discussing performance criticism, at some point, Eiji began listing the major goals of the JSL translation. As he listened, James said, with evident surprise, "You're translating a study Bible!" This may indeed have been the first "study Bible" project to talk with him about the need for performance criticism. In SLBT, it is not the case that a Bible produced for study and a Bible produced for performance are on opposite ends of a spectrum. Performance is deeply incorporated into the whole process. Performance-critical decisions are inescapable, even in a translation that aims to leave as many exegetical options open as possible. If speakers orating a Bible text are forced to make exegetical decisions in their tone of voice and timing, much more are signers, with the multiple "showing" strategies of the visual modality thrust upon them.

Harris gives an example from Mark 3.5, "Jesus was angry as he looked about at them." He notes,

In a printed Bible we simply note the word "angry." But in Auslan we have to think about how angry Jesus was. Readers of a printed Bible can read and interpret the level of Jesus' anger in a variety of ways: Jesus could be merely annoyed or irritated, or, at the other end of the scale, he might be enraged or absolutely furious. In Auslan, a signer's "tone of voice" becomes part of the translation. The degree of anger is indicated by the amplitude or vigour of the sign and by the facial expression of the signer. In this way the signed translation conveys more precisely what the translator understands the text to mean or imply. That understanding is more subjective than mere printed words. (Harris 2002, 234)

Indeed, it is this "subjectiveness" that calls for strong exegesis underlying the performative decisions needed for SLBT.

Deaf oppression

Several authors noted that the Deaf community often functions as an oppressed minority (e.g., Bascom 2008, 86; Tunbridge 2000, 223). Åsberg notes, of the Swedish Bible Society (SBS) team,

There is some repugnance to translate samples of liturgical texts for use in the churches, which SBS recommends in order to improve the chances to receive subsidies from the church. . . . Obviously there is a fear felt in the Deaf community that the well-meaning hearing society will patronize it and obstruct its self-respect and independence. (Åsberg 2008, 73)

Tamez approaches this subject from the standpoint of Deaf community identity, naming issues such as “Deafhood,” and the distancing from a medical view of deafness as hearing loss in favor of a focus on the positive benefits of Deafhood. The culture, the language, and the communal identity point to “Deaf Gain” and away from hearing loss (see Bauman and Murray 2014 for a discussion of “Deaf Gain”). Yes, Deaf people are fully aware that a “missing sense” is involved, but the importance of that one sense is minimal in their estimation. With Tunbridge, it connects to the tendency to favor the prestige spoken language: “Similar dangers are also lurking for every translator who belongs to an oppressed group operating in a dominant culture and language, whether that oppression is linguistic, social, or of any other kind” (Tunbridge 2000, 223). Cho, looking anew at the story of Jesus healing the deaf man, sees there “a complete reimagining of how the Deaf live, move, and co-exist in our world today.” She also points a way forward:

An enormous amount of hard work and campaigning for SL translation need to take place before ignorance, prejudice, and unhelpful stereotyping are overcome in contemporary attitudes toward the Deaf. Instead of acknowledging hearing disability as a handicap, we need to accept the Deaf as they are, namely as people using SL for communication.” (Cho 2012, 150)

It is indeed past time for hearing people to begin listening to the Deaf community instead of assuming that we know better. Most of the larger, multinational entities in the BT world now understand. It may be easier for them than for most since they tend to function within multi-cultural realities and are thus better equipped to notice and respect cultural differences. In the multiple local churches, societies, and associations around the world, the picture is sometimes different. In monocultural realities, people may not notice or respect cultural differences, particularly among groups they have been unconsciously trained to look down on. Often enough, the Deaf and hearing worlds continue each in their own orbit; however, in the inevitable intersections, oppression results—often unintended, but sometimes not. People who have contact with both the hearing and Deaf worlds can help bridge the gaps, negotiating the inevitable tensions with careful advocacy and mediation work.

Deaf people identifying as an oppressed minority is sometimes seen in today's world as a political statement, but it is far more than just that. It is often a simple, unpretentious fact of how a great number of Deaf people view the world. Oppression in many different forms is simply a given in their society. To illustrate, at one point I served as interpreter for a Deaf church member attending a working group on the church's response to disability issues. As many shared their realities, at one point, I saw the lights go on in her head, and she turned to me and said, "Wow, I never realized that disabled people were also discriminated against. . . . I thought it was just us Deaf." In her world, Deaf and people with disabilities both existed, but they were in completely different categories. Sure, she was aware at one level that "her ears didn't hear," but hearing was simply not that important to her. What was important was how the hearing people in her life, well-intentioned and otherwise, treated her. (For example, after her request for an interpreter was refused by her family she was furious, but in the end sat through her own father's funeral with no access. Her identity as Deaf could not penetrate her family's view of loss and shame—their need to hide her deafness from the community. Oppression, sometimes at the deepest, most personal levels, is a common Deaf experience.)

Uiko Yano, the JSL Bible translation project manager, takes it one step further. In a video explaining the importance of translation work, she delves into her own experience to find that even in the Deaf community itself, even in her own actions, language oppression is at work: "The oppression of Japanese Sign Language is a real problem that runs deep, even into the Deaf community. We're trained to look down on our own language" (Yano 2017, 02:59–03:07).

Developing the translation brief

Given the realities just described, it follows that great care must be taken up front in determining with the Deaf community exactly what kind of translation they aim to produce. Adam asks several questions that relate to the translation brief:

Is the Bible translation for Deaf Christians or is it for other Deaf people who know little or nothing of the Bible? Is it for people who can already read a written language or is it for people who are uneducated or illiterate? Is the translation for adults or children? Is it for people who are competent users of SL or is it for people who are learning to use SL? (Adam 2008, 94)

Harris's (2008) article is also helpful for those projects working on a translation brief, with discussions on the following topics:

- the SL audience—who is the Bible translation for?
- the right choice of translators
- the challenge of different SL dialects
- the question of different church traditions and loyalties
- developing new signs—questions of borrowing and inventing
- the use of finger spelling
- technology—problems and solutions.

Translation process

Opinions vary on optimal processes for SLBT. Several *TBT* articles give details of the process their projects use in translation. The first is included in Noe's report on the Omega Project in a section on the project's translation procedures (written by Patrick Graybill, "Focus on Translators" 1990, 438–39). Harris (2002) and Tamez (2008) both include an outline of the process of translation in their articles as well. Tamez notes, "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" (Tamez 2008, 63–64). One size clearly does not fit all. She also points out a specific hazard that has been addressed in more recent translation procedures. "Since the signer has to memorize the translation, there is the risk of it being changed whenever it is filmed again" (66). Åsberg, though, offers another option. He asks, "Which is preferable, to have a *prompter* displaying the text for the signer, or to *memorize* the text? Signers themselves have different opinions. The prompter guarantees a more secure recording, without interruptions. Memorizing gives one a better contact with the intended public, both with the eyes and with the body" (Åsberg 2008, 77). This was, indeed, the original dichotomy for various projects. It was sometimes framed as choosing between accuracy and naturalness. Text, in the form of glosses, would create a pull toward the written language, whereas memory might be completely free from spoken language influence, and thus more natural.

To Åsberg's question, Harris (2008) mentions a third option—using a video cue to prompt the signer. The hope was that "signing from signing" would move the signer away from the world of the written word and move them deeper into the realm of signing. Even so, there is still the "moment of translation" in the recording studio. Of this, Harris observes:

Obvious errors made in the passage are rejected and redone but less obvious errors need to be evaluated. If we do a retake to make a correction, we may risk making another error. It is, in that sense, like reading the Bible for a sound recording. In the latter case there are nuances of expression which mean that the

reading will never be exactly the same on every occasion and the person doing the reading may never be totally happy. Similarly, the signer for the deaf may not be completely happy with the end result of the presentation of every passage. (Harris 2002, 234)

The JSL project took the video cueing innovation one step further. They struggled with one monitor, since natural JSL required the signer to be looking in many different directions over the course of a discourse, sometimes for extended intervals. They had already been using three monitors with the same glossed text on each, color coded to show the signer which monitor to view. When they moved to a signed cue, they increased the number of monitors to as many as eight, each one showing the same video.

Several projects have adopted video cueing. In the Thailand Bible Society project, translation speed after incorporating the use of video cueing nearly doubled, and the consultant's time spent in checking the translation was halved. In this process, the first draft is made from memory with a focus on overall discourse structure and naturalness. To correct errors, the signer records a new clip while copying the previous draft as a cue, signing from a good spot to a good spot, and making the necessary changes to the trouble spots in between. The video editor then edits in the new clips, matching up smoothly with the good portions of the old draft. After multiple revisions, the cue video can become quite a patchwork, but as long as the timing is right, signers are able to copy it. Multiple monitors allow the signer to look in any direction needed and still see the video cue. It does take practice to develop the skill of looking at the opposite monitor from the video cue's eyegaze direction, but once that skill is in place, having an exact copy of a carefully edited draft with all changes included gives the signer confidence that they are signing exactly what the team has decided. Though some were concerned that following a cue would limit expressiveness, in actual practice, the Thai project found that without the immense memory load of all the details to remember, signers actually felt free to "enter the text" more deeply and engage their viewers with confidence that their content was accurate.

In today's SLBT world, a variety of measures are incorporated into the translation procedures to distance the team from the effects of the written/spoken languages. Some of these methods include: (1) keeping hearing team members out of the room when sign drafting is done; (2) referencing other sign language translations or using them, rather than a written text, as a front translation; (3) using storyboards and other pictographic cues as a base for first drafts rather than written text; and (4) using video cueing for subsequent drafts and final recording. In some protocols, signers go so far as to refrain from accessing the written texts themselves, accessing information

only in sign language (via other Deaf readers) until the first draft and multiple revisions have been completed and final recording is near.

It is generally helpful to face these issues with the community before translation starts, realizing of course that specific methodologies may have to change to fit the needs of the specific translation team. In addition to this, gathering some non-biblical naturally-signed samples of various genres, examining them, and agreeing on which signing styles to aim at before beginning will help give guidance later when translation difficulties arise. It will also give teams a basis for understanding the natural progressions of their own languages.

Translation progress

Looking at the process of translation, it might be clear that the process is substantially more difficult than translating into a written text, and that this would make it both more time-consuming and expensive. Written text is static; once a translation decision has been made, the marks that represent it “stay on the paper,” virtual or otherwise. These marks are also randomly accessible, whether by flipping pages or by word searches. In SLBT, one has to progress through a passage in real time to get to a specific concept, second by second. This makes checking the translation a time-consuming endeavor, and changing the translation even more time-consuming, as there is no “find and replace” option yet for video. All of this translates into longer times and higher costs, and this for a smaller population with fewer resources available to them.

Åsberg, with a note of irony, writes, “Since 1998 there has been an ongoing SwedSL Bible translation project. At the present speed, depending on economic and personal resources, the project may be finished in the year 2288. Almost 300 years are of course some years too many for a Bible Society project” (Åsberg 2008, 72). He also notes: “Rather unsurprisingly, the financing of the project is the main problem for SBS” (74). Sipilä also notes funding difficulties, tying them to the problem we began this section with—difficulty in making constructive connections between Deaf and hearing communities to achieve mutual understanding. “If the nature of the SL is not properly understood and if the abilities of Deaf people to understand existing written Bibles is greatly overestimated, who would volunteer to sponsor a translation project into a SL?” (Sipilä 2008, 69).

Closing

One thread that shows throughout the historical process of building SL translation projects is that Deaf leaders have been working to establish

themselves in a Bible translation and engagement world that is dominated by hearing organizations. Woven throughout the practical articles, too, is the repeated call for hearing-led agencies to allow for the growth of Deaf leadership. In general, Deaf leaders see their best way forward as starting their own organizations to self-represent rather than being a tiny part of much larger hearing organizations. That said, they are also deeply aware of the need to collaborate—separation as a group is not to deny the importance of the other, but to make it possible to relate with the other in healthy ways and not be at their mercy.

Thankfully, through concerted advocacy efforts and open-minded leadership, the major BT entities have a much deeper understanding of the Deaf world today than they did when *TBT* first began publishing articles about SLBT. Advocacy work may still be needed to ensure that this understanding functions fully at the local level, but the momentum is in the right direction. As local agencies and their leaders see themselves anew through Deaf eyes, there is indeed hope that both Deaf and hearing communities will benefit from the “Deaf Gain” referred to above.

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Abbreviations

APSDA	Asia Pacific Sign Language Development Association
ASL	American Sign Language
BDI	Bible Deaf International
DDG	Deaf Development Group (FOBAI)
DOOR	Deaf Opportunity OutReach
FOBAI	Forum of Bible Agencies International
IMB	International Mission Board (Southern Baptist)
JSL	Japanese Sign Language
SLBT	Sign language Bible translation
UBS	United Bible Societies
UND	University of North Dakota