

Sign languages and the Bible

Translating the Bible into sign languages is a major challenge for the UBS as it works in partnership with other organizations to make scripture available to over 70 million of the Deaf worldwide who use a sign language as their first language or 'heart language'. There are more than 400 unique sign languages in the world, but so far portions of scripture are available in only 40 of these and it is estimated that less than 2% of all Deaf people have been reached with the gospel.

Despite this significant need there is still considerable misunderstanding about Bible translation into sign languages and about the nature of sign languages themselves. Sadly, through poor awareness and understanding, it is possible that opportunities for vital ministry are being missed and the needs of Deaf communities overlooked, so this short briefing seeks to cover the key issues to be aware of as we all work to provide a Bible for Everyone.

Familiar questions

"Isn't a sign language just a set of signs for a spoken language?"

"I thought there was just one sign language used everywhere?"

"But Deaf people can see so why can't they use our printed Bibles?"

If any of these comments seem familiar to you it's not surprising, because these are very common ideas and questions. If you have lived in the 'hearing' world all your life and haven't had contact with a Deaf community or Deaf culture you will inevitably have wrong ideas, or at least many unanswered questions.



What is a sign language?

A sign language is a visual language which uses a system of manual, facial and body movements as the means of communication. It has its own syntax and complex spatial grammar and is not in any way inferior to a spoken language; in fact in some ways it is a richer form of communication. In common with spoken languages a sign language may be used in different countries around the world and in some countries there are several sign languages in use.

Sign languages have their own origins and are quite distinct from the languages spoken in a country. For example American Sign Language and French Sign Language are part of the same sign language family and American Sign Language (ASL) is not at all similar to British Sign Language (BSL).

Some of the world's sign languages are legally recognized in national laws or constitutions, but others are not and Deaf communities are still working to have their sign language officially recognized. This can be a major issue for communities whose rights, life and culture are fundamentally based in their language, a sign language, which is the primary means of communication.

Signed languages are processed dominantly in the left hemisphere of the brain, just as spoken languages are, so they are natural languages. Knowledge and use of a sign language is central to the life of every Deaf person and essential for social and emotional development. Signed languages are acquired by children in the same time-frame as spoken languages and it is important for Deaf children to learn a sign language, their first language, at an early age.

They may eventually learn to use a spoken language as well, but as this process is normally achieved through the association of sounds with words it can be very difficult for a Deaf person. Tragically, in undeveloped countries, Deaf children may not have access to sign language teaching and in these situations they can remain isolated, even from their family, and unable to communicate with the world around them. In fact 80% of Deaf people in the world do not have access to education so illiteracy is very high.

Why translate the Bible into sign languages?

For those who learn a sign language as their first language it quickly becomes the basis of their entire life experience: it is the way by which they express themselves, gain information and develop relationships. **If they are going to encounter God's Word and understand His message of love it has to be through this language, their 'heart language' – they need the Bible in sign language!**

The significance of Deaf identity

Some missions are now describing the Deaf communities of the world as one of the largest and most unreached people groups in the world. In a world where the only complete sign language New Testament is in American Sign Language and no sign language has anything close to a complete Bible this is not hard to understand! But the idea of the Deaf as a people group is helpful for other reasons and vital to understand when trying to communicate in the most effective and appropriate way.

Deaf people as a linguistic minority have a common experience of life, and this is reflected in Deaf culture. Beliefs, attitudes, history, values and traditions are shared by Deaf people and Deaf culture is at the heart of Deaf communities. In some countries the Deaf community experience discrimination in the areas of employment, education and the legal system, and even if this has been corrected in recent years, the community may have an inherent mistrust of 'hearing' culture and society.

In societies across the world Deafness has often been wrongly equated with lack of intelligence and Deaf people have been deprived of equal opportunities. The histories of Deaf communities are full of examples of Deaf people suffering the inappropriate demands of a hearing culture instead of being allowed to communicate visually.



'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.'

Romans 15:21 (GNT)

Each Deaf community is a cultural group which shares a sign language and a common heritage and it may include family members of Deaf people, sign language interpreters and people who work or socialize with Deaf people and identify with Deaf culture. Deaf people have their own local, national and international organizations and may regularly meet each other through Deaf clubs, events, sporting matches and conventions to share information and common concerns. Article 30, paragraph 4 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes Deaf culture.

All this has implications for the ways in which Bible Societies and ministry partners plan to reach their Deaf communities with the gospel. Great care must be taken to establish trust and to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of Deaf needs, culture and language. It is important to remember that in most countries the Deaf do not view themselves as disadvantaged or 'disabled'; they will have a strong sense of identity rooted in sign language and Deaf culture and their alternative life experience. During all stages of Bible translation work it is vital to involve Deaf translators and the Deaf community and not to work at any time from a 'hearing perspective'. The completed scripture translation will only be effective, natural and acceptable if it is the result of trusted Deaf translators working in close cooperation with the local Deaf community!

What is the UBS doing about this?

Our vision in the UBS is for a large number of Bible Societies to support and take part in Bible translation for sign languages so that scripture will become available for the first time in unreached Deaf communities. We are already working in several countries with international partners like SIL, DOOR and APSDA and essential local partners such as churches, Deaf schools and Associations and the Deaf community itself. **But much more needs to be done: major sign languages used by millions of people are still without any verses from the Bible!**

Early work was started in some Bible Societies about 20 years ago, and there are projects now in a few, but during recent years sign language translation has received little attention. Now there are several reasons to give this ministry a new emphasis: there is improved understanding about how to create effective projects; there is greater sharing of skills and resources between ministry partners and technology provides better support for both the translation process and the distribution and use of the completed video translation.



What can I do...

Your first action should be to find out about the Deaf community in your country and the sign languages being used. How many are using sign language? Is it an officially recognized language? How active is Deaf culture and are there Deaf churches and schools and an Association for the Deaf? Do some churches offer signed interpretation during services? Has any translation of the Bible into sign language been carried out already and how well is this used and accepted?

Discovering this information and contacting some of these organizations will help you to assess the need for sign language scriptures in your country.

... and where can I get help?

Global Bible Translation and Global Mission Exchange are working together to provide help and support in several ways:

-  We can provide information and advice if you want to consider a project for the Deaf community in your country.

-  We can advise you about translation standards and best practice for your work.

-  We maintain a Deaf Communities Affinity Group on the UBS Community site for sharing information and questions. <http://ubscommunity.org/groups/affinity-group-for-deaf-communities/>

-  We can put you in contact with another Bible Society so they can share their experience with you.

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For further reading:

<http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/focus-areas/sign-language>

<http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/focus-areas/deaf-culture>

<http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/focus-areas/education>

<http://www.doorinternational.com/hearing/deaf-culture>

<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/archive/breaking-the-silence>

