

POST AS WIDELY AS POSSIBLE

Amsterdam Manifesto (revised August 21, 2000)

Since the TISLR2000 conference, there has been general consensus among participants, Deaf and hearing alike, that the conference has not been Deaf-friendly due to various reasons. Over 35 of us gathered outside of the conference on Wednesday, July 26, 2000, to address the problems that have come up during the conference. The following manifesto summarizes the main points we have agreed on during the meeting.

One main problem is that there has been no full access to academic discourse for the Deaf participants. This has partly to do with the selection of official languages that were declared for the conference. We know that around the world, the lingua franca within the scientific community, if not in the broader community, is English.

It is just as important to agree on a “lingua franca” for the scientific Deaf community, since the advantages are many: (i) using a lingua franca that is widely understood by the international scientific Deaf community will provide access to as wide a Deaf audience as possible; (ii) it will be financially more efficient to pay for a few interpreters to translate into one language, i.e. the lingua franca, which is understood by most of the audience rather than pay for individual interpreters from each of the many countries which would perhaps benefit only one or two participants; (iii) if one provides interpreters in one sign language that all people know, and provides interpreters in that same language for all sessions, Deaf attendees will not be constrained by the availability of interpreters and will have full freedom in choosing which session to attend, like their hearing peers.

It seems that BSL and ASL are the two signed languages which fit the criteria for a “lingua franca” for the scientific Deaf community, since they are widely understood by Deaf scientists from around the world. Thus we have agreed at the meeting that the official signed languages to be used for linguistics conferences should gradually include, over a span of 10 years, both BSL and ASL. Since this is an international setting, one should show respect and cultural sensitivity to the international audience by reducing the American (and British) culture-specific aspects of these signed languages and by making heavy use of the universal aspects of the signed languages.

The signed languages named above are mainly for TISLR conferences, but for a smaller international conference, it may make better sense to use another sign language that is widely understood by the audience, e.g. Swedish Sign Language if the conference consists mostly of participants from the Scandinavia area.

Note that these languages are for the purpose of linguistics conferences only, since there is a need to discuss technical material in depth and therefore a need to use a full signed language. We are not discussing whether to select a ‘lingua franca’ for other international Deaf-related events, like those focusing on sports, art, and/or culture (e.g. Deaf Way).

In addition to using the ‘lingua franca’ at scientific gatherings, we fully support providing access in the local signed language, since this serves to recognize the signed language on

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an international level and empowers the local Deaf community, the kind of support which is always sorely needed everywhere.

Thus, we strongly encourage future TISLR (and other conference) organizing committees to follow these guidelines:

- (1) That the official languages of the conference should include English, the local signed language, BSL, and ASL; (in which case access through English should also be provided through computer-aided real-time captioning (CART) services);
- (2) That the committee should ensure there are sufficient funds to provide sign language interpreters for all simultaneous sessions of the conference and for all social events during the conference.
- (3) That there should be at least one Deaf scientist on the organizing committee to ensure that necessary steps are taken to provide full access for the whole scientific community.

One should keep in mind that most of sign language research is dependent on Deaf RA's (research assistants) and on data from native Deaf signers. If it were not for the hard work of these Deaf researchers, very little progress would have been made in sign language research! One must never forget to acknowledge their contributions, and one way to acknowledge their work is by giving something back to the signing community. The sign language researchers can easily do this by following the above guidelines and thereby making the conferences more Deaf-friendly. Participants who bring their own interpreters can afford to do so only because they are receiving grants or have salaried jobs. This puts Deaf students especially at a great disadvantage, since they do not have either, a situation which is unfair since the conference is also for linguists-in-training. If the conference can be made Deaf-friendly through the above guidelines, it will provide a platform on which prospective Deaf linguists can learn about the state of art in sign language research. Attracting more Deaf linguists this way can only serve to raise the overall quality of sign language research.

In sum, the ultimate goal behind these guidelines is to promote academic discourse among the Deaf and hearing linguists so that they can learn and benefit from one another's knowledge. Of course, the ideal type of interaction would be direct, in which all hearing linguists can sign along with everybody else. We hope that everybody will become more sensitive and accord one another respect.

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