

# **Sign language interpreting in Australia: An overview**

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This paper presents an overview of the sign language interpreting profession in Australia. The paper is organised into five parts. First, we provide an introduction to the Australian context by providing brief geographic and demographic information, and specific information about the Deaf community and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). We then present information on three key areas: the profession, training and research.

## **The Australian context**

Australia is a huge country, approximately the same size as North America with a population of approximately 20 million. It is divided into six states and two territories, as shown in Figure 1, with the majority of the population residing in urban regions.

English is Australia's national language, but due to cultural diversity in the population, over 200 languages are spoken in the community. Languages other than English are not only spoken by migrants who have settled in Australia from all over the world, more than 60 different languages are spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Figure 1: Map of Australia



### *Deaf population*

The estimates of the number of signing deaf people in Australia vary greatly. Table 1, taken from Johnston (2003), provides a summary of published estimates.

Table 1: Published estimates of Australian Deaf population

Source	[Australian] Population in millions	Signing deaf community	Implied prevalence rate [in 1/1000 of population]
Flynn, 1987	15.8 (1985)	>9,500	0.57
Power, 1986	15.9	7,000	0.44
Johnston, 1989	16.0 (1987)	<10,000	0.58
Deaf Society of New South Wales, 1989	16.6	>15,000	0.89
Hyde & Power, 1991	17.2	>15,400+	0.89
Deaf Society of New South Wales, 1998	6.3 (1997, NSW)	>1,261 to >2,522	0.19 to 0.39
Ozolins & Bridge, 1999	18.9	>15,000	0.79

Given that the Australian population is somewhere around 20 million, using the range of prevalence rates from the above table (0.19 – 0.89), an estimate of the signing deaf population in Australia would be somewhere between 3,800 to 17,800. Based on his research using school enrolments and National Acoustic Laboratory records, Johnston (2003) estimates the signing deaf population in Australia to be approximately 6,500.

### *Australian Sign Language*

The sign language used within the Deaf community in Australia is Australian Sign Language (Auslan). Across Australia there are several distinct social ‘varieties’ of Auslan. However, these linguistic differences do not impact greatly on successful communication between signers from different regions. Generally the differences are at the lexical level of the language and common sign variations are quite familiar to signers from different regions.

An artificial sign system, Australasian Signed English, has wide-spread usage in schools where deaf students are mainstreamed. As such, some signs from this system of signing have gained common usage in the adult signing community. While there is still much debate about the use of artificial signed systems in deaf education its continued use means that a large proportion of deaf children do not begin to acquire Auslan until after leaving school.

In addition, there has been some discussion in the literature about traditional Indigenous Sign Languages in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities. O’Reilly (2005) discusses some issues surrounding interpreting for deaf individuals from ATSI communities, and highlights the unique nature of their indigenous sign languages.

### **The interpreting profession**

The field of sign language interpreting has been described as an “emerging” profession (Scott Gibson, 1992; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004) and this is certainly an apt description of the Australian context of sign language interpreting (Napier, 2004b; Spring, 2000).

## *Accreditation*

Auslan interpreters are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) – a body which accredits translators and interpreters in spoken languages, as well as in Auslan/English – and testing has taken place since 1982 in Auslan/English (Flynn, 1990). Independent testing of skills still takes place today, without any requirement for interpreters to undertake formal training, instead choosing to sit a video examination consisting of questions on culture and ethics, and various interpreting tasks between Deaf and hearing people to gain their accreditation.

For most languages, interpreter accreditation is available at four levels: Paraprofessional interpreter; Interpreter; Conference interpreter; and Conference interpreter (senior). For Auslan interpreters, however, accreditation is only currently available at Paraprofessional interpreter and Interpreter levels. Paraprofessional interpreter level is defined as follows:

This represents a level of competence in interpreting for the purpose of general conversations, generally in the form of non-specialist dialogues... [whereby] interpreting in situations where specialised terminology or more sophisticated conceptual information is not required [and]... a depth of linguistic ability is not required (NAATI, 2006).

Interpreter level, however, is defined thus:

...the minimum level of competence for professional interpreting... [and] may be regarded as the Australian professional standard. Interpreters are capable of interpreting across a wide range of subjects involving dialogues at specialist consultations... [whereby] interpreting in both language directions for a wide range of subject areas usually involving specialist consultations with other professionals, e.g., doctor/ patient, solicitor/ client, bank manager/ client, court interpreting... [and] interpreting in situations where some depth of linguistic ability in both languages is necessary (NAATI, 2006).

Due to the limitation of advanced accreditation levels for Auslan interpreters and the huge demand for their services, those accredited at Interpreter level often work in

conference settings and other situations where sophisticated linguistic ability is required, and those who are accredited as Paraprofessional interpreters often perform the role in 'specialised consultations'. Due to increasing demand and approaches from the Australian Association of the Deaf, the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA), and interpreting service providers, NAATI is now working with Auslan panel members to develop a new Conference interpreter test.

### *Professional association*

The Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA) has been in existence in various forms at state level for approximately 20 years, and the current national membership stands at 250. The formalized roles of an accreditation authority for Auslan interpreters and an association for practitioners have supported the professionalisation of the field in Australia in recent years<sup>1</sup>.

### *A profile of the profession*

A total of 722 Auslan interpreters have been accredited by NAATI between November 1982 and June 2005 (Sherrill Bell, Executive Officer, NAATI, personal communication, June 2005). Of these, 630 were accredited at paraprofessional level and 92 at Interpreter level.

The aforementioned figure is not representative of the number of practitioners working in the industry today for various reasons (Orima, 2004). Practising accredited interpreters are estimated to be in the region of 250-300, although it is impossible to accurately pinpoint this figure. Additionally, unqualified interpreters are working in some states and territories due to increasing demand for interpreters outstripping the supply available, particularly in the educational interpreting sector.

A demographic survey of 125 NAATI accredited Auslan interpreters by Napier and Barker (2003) found that most respondents were female (83%); accredited at paraprofessional level by NAATI (70%); and predominantly aged between 26-45 years. The majority (77%) held post-secondary qualifications of some type, however less than half of those held University qualifications (48% completed, or working towards). Less than half the respondents had undertaken formal interpreter training,

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<sup>1</sup> See Napier (2004b) for a more detailed discussion of the profession, training and accreditation of interpreters in Australia compared with the UK and USA.

largely due to the lack of availability of training courses in Australia until relatively recently.

### **Interpreter training**

Interpreter training courses have been available in various Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges around Australia since 1986 (Bontempo & Hodgetts, 2001), and it is increasingly more common for practitioners to undertake training rather than just sitting a NAATI test.

TAFE colleges conduct language acquisition and Paraprofessional Interpreter training courses in Auslan/English nationwide (mostly at Diploma level). TAFE level interpreter training courses are typically one year part-time (entry level paraprofessional interpreter training after completing 2 years full time, or 4 years part time, Auslan language acquisition classes at TAFE).

Macquarie University (in Sydney) is the only university in Australia offering training at postgraduate level for NAATI accredited interpreters with significant experience and employment history to advance their skills.

### **Interpreting research**

To date, there has been very little empirical research on interpreting in general in Australia (Ozolins, 1998). A few articles have been published on the historical progression of sign language interpreting in Australia, and on the need for more awareness about Deaf-centred interpreting services (Bridge, 1995; Flynn, 1985, 1990; Hyde & Power, 1991, 1992). Bridge has presented several conference papers (Bridge, 1991, 1996, 1997) on issues surrounding the training, assessment and accreditation of Auslan interpreters, and the types of environments where Auslan interpreters might be seen to work. Furthermore Madden (1992) discussed the difficulties for Auslan interpreters in acquiring Auslan as a second language to native-like fluency. In addition Spring (1992; 1995; 1996; 1999; 2000) has presented various papers on issues facing sign language interpreters in Australia, in relation to consumer choice, language proficiency, qualifications of interpreters, and interpreting in medical and

legal environments. One paper presented by Spring and Teh (1993) discussed the unique aspects of higher education for Deaf students, and the importance of the role of sign language interpreters in education, giving advice on how university lecturers could best work with interpreters.

In 1998, the first qualitative survey of sign language interpreters working in Australia was conducted, in order to provide a detailed analysis of current provision and future needs in the field (Ozolins & Bridge, 1999, 2000). The study identified several issues of concern, including the changing pattern of provision of sign language interpreting, un-met needs of members of the Deaf community, interpreters working without sufficient levels of language fluency, and the need to improve the qualitative provision of Auslan interpreting services in educational settings.

Since that time, the amount of research and publication in the Australian sign language interpreting field has increased exponentially. For example, Napier and Adam (2002) conducted a linguistic analysis to compare the interpreting output of Auslan and BSL interpreters, Leneham and Napier (2003) discussed the current code of ethics for Auslan interpreters; Napier and Barker (2003; Napier & Barker, 2004). Madden's research (2001, 2005) focused on occupational health and safety issues for Auslan interpreters, and the rate of interpreter burn out. Banna (2004) and Leneham (2005) have both analysed and discussed case studies of theatre interpreting; Conlon and Napier (2004) discuss the translation of children's books into Auslan; and two publications have focused on the dynamics of mental health interpreting (Cornes & Napier, 2005; Napier & Cornes, 2004); and Napier produced several publications in relation to the linguistic coping strategies and omission production of interpreters (2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004a; 2004). A recently published region specific textbook (Napier, McKee, & Goswell, 2006) has also strengthened the knowledge and understanding of the local sign language interpreting context.

## **Conclusion**

A sea-change is occurring in the interpreting field in Australia as we move from primarily a community based interpreting industry with little academic foundation supporting and guiding members, to one that is increasingly requiring higher standards in training and greater academic knowledge and research to support interpreting practice.

This overview of sign language interpreting in Australia appears representative of the international scene in sign language interpreting. Whilst some regions in the world are considerably in advance of Australia, such as North America and parts of Europe, the role of the sign language interpreter is effectively the same in these regions and the challenges presented by an evolving Deaf community; the need for better training; and significant demand and supply issues for the profession generally, appear to be common threads in our sector irrespective of region.

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