

AWARENESS

# SA's deaf community has made significant strides

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WE HAVE just emerged from having celebrated Deaf Awareness Month. This year, the campaign reflected on the great strides the South African Deaf community, a cultural minority group, has made since 1994.

Our exposure to deafness is often based on what we see at the bottom corner of our television screens during prime time live newscasts and televised statements of national importance.

We might not understand the sign language and gestures we see but have grown to trust that what we witness is correct.

It all changed in 2013 at late president Nelson Mandela's memorial service when we were left with egg on our faces.

The interpreter, who rendered his services next to dignitaries that included the then-US president Barack Obama, was, in fact, a fake. Oscar-winning deaf actress Marlee Matlin tweeted about the atrocity as the organisers embarrassingly removed the fake interpreter from the stage.

The procurement and vetting faux

pas made international news headlines, and some of us boasted that we smelt a rat from the start.

"What he signed just didn't make sense to me," and "It was very different to the SABC interpreter's sign language" immediately became the opening lines to the national discourse that followed. We have certainly become more cautious about whom we trust in the blue box. Nowadays, we glance to the left bottom of the screen whenever the president speaks. Be it to catch a meme moment or simply to check that what is signed is correct.

Since the start of Covid-19 and the president's fortnightly "family meetings", we have been inspired to come up with memes that make fun of serious issues.

A shot which involved the "sign lady in a blue box" depicting a person rolling a zol, smoking a zol and sharing a zol following Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma's briefing, catapulted the memes of both women to fame.

The interpreter certainly knew how to pull a blunt in front of a nation.

Be that as it may, have you ever wondered how interpreting works?



WE HAVE become more cautious about sign language interpreters and their authenticity, says the writer. | African News Agency (ANA)

Scholars in the field of translation and interpreting studies refer to simultaneous interpreting as a strenuous cognitive task.

That is because the interpreter listens to what the speaker says, deciphers the meaning of the spoken word and transfers the information into a signed language readily understood by the deaf community.

The interpreter anticipates what the speaker might say next and finds ways to adapt a linear language into a visual, gestural three-dimensional,

non-linear language. The interpreter mediates between a hearing world based on sound and phonetic nuances to a "silent" world based on visuals and nuances expressed through facial expressions. When producing a film, a director translates a carefully crafted script to the silver screen. Similarly, the signed language interpreter adapts spoken language to a visual language with the same intent as the speaker.

When the interpreter is not familiar with the subject matter, simultaneous interpreting increases in difficulty. A difficult task becomes more demanding when the interpreter must decipher unfamiliar accents or when the environment is too noisy to concentrate.

Interpreting is indeed a stressful cognitive task that requires advanced problem-solving skills, as they facilitate communication between a majority culture and a minority culture, of which, the latter continues to experience marginalisation, discrimination and disempowerment based on the lack of equal access to information.

In dealing with the societal and cultural complexities within a South

African context, the interpreter must understand the psyche of both hearing and deaf members of society.

It is no surprise that simultaneous interpreting is considered one of the most stressful occupations, equal to aviation control. How then do interpreters successfully create equal access to information to both hearing and deaf people?

No, interpreters do not possess enhanced cognitive abilities because of a Darwinian evolutionary intervention. Interpreters follow a strict code of ethics that promotes professionalism, accuracy, impartiality, and continuous development. Their experience allows them to mitigate the high cognitive demand they experience.

We certainly need to appreciate the impartial conduits often confined to blue boxes in the corner of our television screens. Remember that they operate in high-demand, low-control settings.

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