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News 'with' or 'in' sign language? Case study on the comprehensibility of sign language in new broadcasts

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the issue of comprehensibility in TV news WITH sign language. It starts by discussing academic research showing that Deaf viewers often struggle to understand the simultaneous interpretation of newscasts in sign language. Based on this literature review, we investigate the Flemish case, where public broadcaster VRT offers the evening news with Flemish Sign Language (VGT) by a hearing interpreter, in three empirical research stages. First, we conducted twenty interviews with Deaf viewers who confirmed that comprehension is a key problem, for reasons mostly related to the signing of the interpreters and some technical issues. Second, we analysed three international alternative approaches, focusing in particular on the use of Deaf interpreters and presenters. Third, based on the interviews and the international examples, we developed an alternative, summarized format and produced a test broadcast, which was shown to and discussed individually with the twenty interviewees of the first research stage. Overall, they preferred the summarized format and understood the newscast tailored to their language and information needs much better, among other things because of the Deaf presenter who they thought was more fluent in sign language. More fundamentally, they also identified more strongly with the Deaf news anchor presenting TV news IN sign language.

**Keywords**

Live sign language interpreting newscast; Deaf and hearing interpreter; Deaf presenter; Flanders; comprehensibility; interviews.
News “with” or “in” sign language?
Case study on the comprehensibility of sign language in news broadcasts

Introduction

The 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states that persons with disabilities should be able to take part in cultural life, that they should be able to enjoy cultural activities such as television in accessible formats, and that they are entitled “to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf cultures” (U.N. 2006: art. 30). Article 21 further specifies:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice […], including by: […] (d) Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities. (U.N. 2006)

Based on these stipulations and their translation into national legislation, broadcasters across the world offer news broadcasts with subtitling and/or sign language.\(^1\) However, as we will develop below, research shows that Deaf\(^2\) people often struggle to understand newscasts with in-vision interpretation in sign language. This article explores reasons for this lack of comprehension, both by offering a literature review and by evaluating one specific case, the news with simultaneous interpretation in sign language offered by Flemish public service broadcaster VRT.

Our qualitative empirical research consists of three stages: first, a selection of interpreted news items was shown and discussed with a sample of twenty Flemish Deaf people; second, alternative formats were explored by analyzing a purposive sample of three other European cases, visiting their news studios and interviewing producers; and third, an alternative

\(^1\) Although subtitles are an important tool for understanding, many Deaf people prefer sign language as this is their first language.

\(^2\) We capitalize Deaf as we use the term to refer to those who have a Deaf cultural identity (Stone 2007) and for whom sign language is their first language.
Flemish format was produced and evaluated by the original sample of twenty Flemish Deaf people. Based on this three-step research process, we conclude by offering a number of recommendations to improve newscasts for Deaf viewers.

**International research on the comprehensibility of news with sign language interpreting**

The aim of this section is not to provide an overview of the literature on (news) broadcasts with sign language in general, but to focus in particular on the question of comprehension. Research in a variety of national contexts discloses that Deaf people often experience difficulties in understanding sign language interpreters in the media. For instance, Norwood (1979) found that Deaf people in the U.S. more easily understand media supported by subtitling than by sign language interpreters. Research in the U.K. showed that Deaf respondents prefer subtitles, programs in sign language, or programs with Deaf interpreters over programs with hearing interpreters (Kyle 2007), as they think the sign language of hearing interpreters is different from their own, among other things because it is more influenced by English (Steiner 1998). Similarly, research in China disclosed that Deaf viewers have difficulties understanding the language use of sign language interpreters on television (Xiao and Yu 2009). Xiao and Li (2013) further explored the quality criteria used by Chinese Deaf viewers, finding that comprehensibility is their first priority, followed by a smooth delivery with moderate speed, and appropriate facial expressions. Their respondents were largely unhappy with the quality of interpreting and criticized the very lack of comprehensibility, partly because of the high speed and the lack of appropriate facial expressions.

In addition to issues related to the interpreters' language use, Wehrmeyer's (2015) research in the South-African context also identified technical issues such as the small size of the interpreter on screen as well as the difficulty for viewers to divide their attention between different sources of visual information as reasons for incomprehension. Using eye-tracking, Wehrmeyer (2014) found that Deaf viewers tend to focus on the sign language interpreter, whether they understood them or not. Shifting the perspective to that of the interpreters, research in Italy by Kellett Bidoli and Sala (2011) identified a number of challenges complicating the work of news interpreters: a lack of time, both to prepare and to simultaneously interpret; the use of specific jargon in the news; multiple names of people, places and organizations; the lack of a sign language equivalent for certain words; the influence of spoken language on sign language; and the use of regional variations of sign language.
Overall, existing research shows that news broadcasts with simultaneous (hearing) sign language interpreters tend to be hardly understood. Wehrmeyer (2015) clusters the explanatory factors mentioned above in three sets. A first set is related to the Deaf viewers themselves, who may have limited sign language proficiency or lack in background knowledge about the news item. A second set is related to the interpreters, in particular their linguistic skills and sign language proficiency. Thirdly, some problems are related to technical aspects such as the size of the screen inset for the image of the interpreter, the synchronicity between images and interpreting, the use or lack of subtitles, and the simultaneous presence of different forms of visual information.

**TV news in Flemish Sign Language**

Flanders is the Northern, Dutch-language community in Belgium, with about 6.5 million inhabitants speaking Dutch. Flanders has its own sign language, Flemish Sign Language (VGT, Vlaamse Gebarentaal), which was recognized by Flemish government in 2006, and is different from Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT, Nederlandse Gebarentaal) which is used in the Netherlands. It is important to note that VGT has only recently been recognised as a language (2006) and is not very standardized yet for lack of policy and educational support, and that regional dialects continue to exist (Vandemeulebroucke 2013).

Belgium is a federalized country, and broadcasting is regulated at the level of the Flemish community. The Flemish Media Decree stipulates that the Flemish public broadcaster make a substantial part of its programming accessible to people with visual or auditory disabilities, using, among other things, subtitling and sign language (Mediadecreet 2009: art. 151). The Flemish public broadcaster VRT is regulated by five-year government contracts, and the 2012-2016 contract was the first to stipulate that VRT should (only) offer its 7 PM news as well as its children's news broadcasts with sign language, beside subtitling all news and current affairs programs (VRT and Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2011).

In September 2011, during a preliminary test week, both programs were alternatively interpreted by a hearing interpreter (HI) and a Deaf interpreter (DI), the latter reinterpreting input from a feed interpreter, a HI behind the camera who interprets from spoken language to signed language, so that the DI can further translate this to the audience (Adam et al. 2014). Although the federation of Flemish Deaf associations Fevlado (now Doof Vlaanderen) pleaded for the use of DIs (Fevlado 2010), for practical and budgetary reasons VRT chose to work with HIs for the 7 PM news, Het Journaal. From December 2012 onwards, Het Journaal was
broadcast with simultaneous sign language interpreting by HIs. However, the daily children's news program *Karrewiet* was interpreted by DIs from September 2012, which is achievable as the script for this program can be prepared before the broadcast and read off from an autocue screen (De Meulder and Heyerick 2013). This is not possible for the mostly live 7 PM news, for which the script is not fully ready before the broadcast and which is also more complex in content.

Leading up to the new 2016-2020 management contract, Fevlado together with the Center of Expertise in Flemish Sign Language³ and the Advisory Board for Flemish Sign Language⁴ wrote a joint report explaining why they were unsatisfied with *Het Journaal* with sign language (Fevlado et al. 2015). They criticized the use of HIs who are generally not native speakers of VGT, which to them leads to a great influence of Dutch on the signing as well as a lack of cultural knowledge of the media needs of the Deaf community. They also argued that the live interpreting of the news, with its high speaking speed and complex structure, is almost impossible to render into intelligible VGT. By contrast, the simpler children's news program *Karrewiet* was lauded as it uses a DI. For this reason, the associations pleaded for a dedicated news program for adults, tailored to Deaf viewers and presented by a Deaf person, with VGT as the original language. Nevertheless, the 2016-2020 government contract with VRT did not follow this advice and made similar stipulations as the 2012-2016 one:

VRT makes its offer accessible to to people with an auditory/visual impairment. [...] A newscast for adults and the children's news are offered with an interpreter in Flemish Sign Language on the open channel. (VRT and Flemish Government 2016: 52-53)

As a consequence, at the time of writing VRT's news offer for Deaf viewers remains unchanged.

**Research on the news with Flemish Sign Language (VGT)**

The news with VGT has not been researched extensively, but a few publications are worth mentioning. De Meulder and Heyerick (2013) analysed the feedback of Deaf viewers after the

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³ Since 2008, the Flemish Sign Language Centre (Vlaams GebarentaalCentrum, commonly abbreviated to VGTC) has been recognised by the Flemish government as a “knowledge and coordination centre for Flemish Sign Language” (www.vgtc.be).

⁴ The Advisory Board for Flemish Sign Language (Adviescommissie Vlaamse Gebarentaal) was established in 2008, following the recognition of VGT in 2006. It advises the Flemish government on VGT including factors and measures that impact on its use (www.adviesvgt.be).
VRT test of news with VGT in 2011. They found that Deaf respondents had few comments on the HI, which they attributed to a “better than nothing” attitude, following Neves (2007) who found that Deaf viewers tend to not voice their needs but instead accommodate to what they are given. De Meulder and Heyerick themselves were critical of the decision to use HIs for Het Journaal, and they pleaded for the use of DIs, building on the work of Stone (2007) who introduced the notion of the “Deaf translation norm”. Stone, an academic researcher working on news interpreting in the U.K., introduced the notion of the Deaf translation norm to refer to the fluency and community identity of a Deaf interpreter. In a news context, the Deaf translation norm implies using different strategies to optimize the Deaf audience’s understanding and to make the sign language on screen seem less like a translation (Stone 2007, see also Stone 2009).

Following Stone, De Meulder and Heyerick stated that TV interpreting should be done by Deaf people, distinguishing nine dimensions of importance: a practical dimension (with some adjustments Deaf people can do the job); a political dimension (this is a Deaf job, HIs are already in high demand in other settings); an empowerment dimension (the DI can act as a role model); a cultural dimension (DIs are cultural insiders); a responsibility dimension (DIs are more aware of their responsibility towards the community they belong to); a linguistic dimension (interpreters need to have native fluency); a language ownership dimension (native users should be role models for sign language in the public sphere); a process/modality dimension (DIs are less influenced by spoken language); and a motivation dimension (DIs tend to have a different motivation from HIs, focusing more on empowerment).

Most other research on news with VGT was done by BA or MA students. Debeerst (2013) found that Flemish Deaf people have mixed feelings about VRT's offer in VGT but are unanimously positive about “community media”, i.e. media initiated by and made for the community. Brosens (2018) found that Flemish Deaf people think the quality of interpreting on Karrewiet with a DI is better than that in the news with VGT by a HI, and prefer subtitles over a HI. Both Vandemeulebroucke (2013) and Thoelen (2015) also found a preference for community media, while the news with HI was rated negatively for several reasons, such as incorrect translation and the interference of Dutch on the translation.

Taking the point of view of HIs, De Keyzer and Primusz (2013) found a number of obstacles these are confronted with. First, the live interpreting of a 40-minute newscast at high speed is exhausting. Second, the program is not completely prerecorded, so the interpreters have to sign a large portion without any preparation. Third, the newscast deals with a great number of varied topics, which requires a very broad knowledge of current affairs and sign
language. And fourth, the news contains many terms for which there is no one on one relation with signs in Flemish sign language.

Overall, the problems identified in Flemish research are very much in line with those identified in the international literature, observing a lack of understanding of news with live interpretation by HIs and a preference for news with DIs and/or Deaf presenters. Building on these insights, in our own research we aimed to answer three questions:

RQ1: How do Flemish Deaf viewers evaluate the current VRT news offer with VGT?
RQ2: Which alternative formats for accessible news are offered by European broadcasters?
RQ3: What alternative format for accessible news could be developed by VRT?

Methods

The qualitative research reported in this paper had three stages, each aiming to answer one research question. In stage I, we aimed to more systematically evaluate the current news with VGT by interviewing with twenty Deaf people. Rather than trying to 'objectively' assess the comprehension of the current broadcasts, our aim was to collect the experiences and evaluations of actual viewers, prioritizing their perspectives, so the interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide but remaining open to input from the interviewees (Bryman 2004). The interviews were conducted by the Deaf-born researcher, recorded on video, analysed and transcribed in Dutch for further analysis and quotation. The interviews were divided in three distinct parts. First, the participants were asked about their knowledge of VGT and Dutch, as well as their news viewing. Second, they were shown eight clips, five from Het Journaal and three from Karrewiet, without subtitling except for news clips in which a foreign language was spoken. The clips were randomly chosen from a two-week period (17 to 30 June 2019), but making sure the diversity of the offer was well represented, including clips with all DIs and HIs as well as different news categories. After each clip the researcher checked how much the participants understood, followed by questions about issues that arose in the literature review: comprehensibility, correct language use, use of standardized VGT, speed, synchronization

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5 The interviews were recorded with explicit, written consent, and the interview transcripts were anonymized, in accordance with the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of (University).
6 Throughout the paper, 'the researcher' refers to the Deaf-born researcher who conducted the empirical fieldwork, and 'we' to both authors, including the hearing supervisor of the study.
between signing and images, the transfer of information, and the preference for HI or DI. Third, the participants were asked about their general wishes and expectations for news on VRT.

The interview participants were openly recruited using a call for participation in Dutch and in VGT on different platforms (among others Facebook and newsletters). Participants were self-selected, as is usual in qualitative research which does not rely on large probability samples (Bryman 2004). Everyone who volunteered was interviewed, but as we aimed for a quota sample in relation to gender (50% male and 50% female interviewees) and a good balance in terms of age, region, and knowledge of VGT, for the final interview we specifically searched for a woman from the province of Limburg. The final sample comprised ten women and ten men representing the different Flemish provinces and ranging in age between 19 and 72 years old. The sample included two participants with Usher syndrome, which implies a progressive loss of sight, with many variations; both participants could still see enough to see the interpreters. Importantly, for this research, they also varied in terms of VGT knowledge and identification, as well as knowledge of Dutch. All participants knew VGT, but to different degrees: twelve considered VGT to be their mother tongue, four considered themselves bilingual (Dutch and VGT), for three Dutch was their mother tongue, and one grew up learning French-Belgian sign language.

In stage II, we aimed to identify alternative formats through international benchmarking. Using a case study design (Bryman 2004), we searched for comparable contexts, limiting our search to daily European news programs by public broadcasters. In preparation, the researcher undertook a comprehensive overview of the news broadcasts adapted for Deaf people in all the 34 countries with membership of the European Union of the Deaf at the time, using the website signlangtv.org but also drawing on other information and contact with Deaf associations, broadcasters and experts. We found four models: regular newscasts with HIs (like VRT's Het Journaal); regular newscasts with an alternating pool of HIs and DIs; summarized newscasts with DI; summarized newscasts with joint presentation by DI and HI. Based on this overview, we selected three countries and cases for further analysis, each offering a different approach which will be discussed below: BBC in the U.K., DR in Denmark, and SVT in Sweden. For each program, the producers were contacted by e-mail to ask about the production process, and subsequently each production company was visited to observe the production process and to interview producers. Our main aim, in this stage, was to identify advantages as well as shortcomings of alternative approaches from the producers’ point of view.

In stage III of our empirical research, we aimed to develop and test an alternative format for accessible news, based on the results of the first two stages. As elaborated below, we opted
for a summarized newscast of fifteen minutes in VGT, based on an actual VRT newscast but presented by a Deaf news anchor. This new format was subsequently shown to the twenty participants also interviewed in stage I, who were interviewed again to ask about their viewing experience. At this stage of the research, the main question was: are the problems identified in stage I solved in this new format? To answer this question, the same issues as in stage I were addressed in the interviews. Again, our aim here was to collect insights from the actual viewers’ point of view.

Findings

Stage I

During the first round of interviews, the participants were critical about the clips from Het Journaal with a HI while they were more positive about the Karrewiet clips with a DI. Despite differences in knowledge of VGT and Dutch, all participants struggled to understand the HIs, in line with existing national and international research on the topic (Kyle 2007; Norwood 1979; Wehrmeyer 2014, 2015; Xiao and Li 2013; Xiao and Yu 2009). For instance, Carine said:

I don't feel I understood it 100 per cent. I understand the signs, but I don't remember it. I don't understand the story. I keep on concentrating on the interpreter who keeps on signing, but yeah…?

Most of the participants felt they understood less than half, and missed many details. They said they had to reconstruct the meaning based on the bits of information they did understand, drawing on images, background knowledge and textual support on screen. Those who knew Dutch well understood new or unknown signs better because they could draw on the mouthing of the Dutch words (which is a component of VGT for some signs), and they understood news items better because they were familiar with the structure of Dutch sentences. Participants also understood the content better when it was simple and well-structured, and when the news images were less busy (for instance without a lot of action).

When reflecting on reasons for their lack of understanding, the participants referred to the three sets of explanatory factors identified by Wehrmeyer (2015). First, some reasons were connected to the Deaf viewers themselves. A number of participants referred to their lack of

7 The quotations are translations by the authors, based on the Dutch-language transcription of the interviews. Pseudonyms instead of real names are used for reasons of anonymity.
interest in or background knowledge about certain topics like politics or sports. Some also stated that they did not understand the content because they do not have sufficient sign language skills. This is remarkable, as the respondents all fluently use VGT as first or second language (for those who have Dutch as a first language). When asked for further explanation, some respondents referred to the fact that hearing interpreters had had the opportunity to be trained in VGT, while they hadn’t, which is why they thought that the hearing interpreters had more knowledge about the VGT lexicon and grammar.

Most reasons for the lack of understanding, however, belonged to the second set identified by Wehrmeyer (2015), connected to the interpreters. Thus, the participants criticized the lack of cohesion between signs, which follow each other without creating a coherent narrative. They also noticed a number of lexical and grammatical errors, often influenced by Dutch, which they attributed to the fact that the HIs are not native users of VGT, and also to the high speed and lack of preparation. For instance, Kasper said: “In Het Journaal you can clearly see that it needs to be very quick, you can clearly see that in the signing of news interpreters.” They also addressed the quality of the fingerspelling of names and terms which do not have a VGT sign, which is affected by the high speed. Thus, Nathalie stated:

I struggle to understand the names of people in the news with VGT. Sometimes the fingerspelling is too quick. Then I also have to quickly check the face of the person in the news image to see who it is about. That's too much for me at once. The information density is enormously high here.

The interviewees also attributed their lack of understanding to the use of unknown signs, for instance regional variations of VGT or signs invented on the spot by the HI. Talking about such unknown signs, Marnix said:

Yes, and that's why I sometimes lose the thread of the argument. Then I keep on thinking about the sign they used and what it means. Then I can't follow anymore, and I don't watch the images anymore. Then I keep on puzzling about it.

Some participants also noted that the specific background knowledge required of HIs is sometimes lacking, for instance in relation to sports.

The quality of interpreting was also the key reason why participants said they understood the Karrewiet clips much better that the clips from Het Journaal. Even if the
Karrewiet clips were simpler in content and form (as they were aimed at children), the participants most strongly stressed the fact that the DI was a native VGT user and that he narrated the news in a more natural way, also in terms of facial expression and mouthing, i.e. prosody. For instance, Johan remarked:

The news interpreter was a little more static, there was some facial expression but it was rather flat and she didn't move very much. The Karrewiet interpreter moves his whole body more, he moves around, there is facial expression, there is more body shift and role shifting, everything's bigger and clearer.

This is reminiscent of the "Deaf translation norm" (Stone 2007) discussed above, referring to the fluency and community identity of a Deaf interpreter.

Thirdly, a number of reasons for the lack of understanding of Het Journaal were of a more technical nature. One problem was the lack of synchronization between signing and images, the signing generally lagging some seconds behind the images, which for instance made it hard to understand who was talking in a news report. A related problem was the difficulty in watching both the interpreter and the news images simultaneously rather than switching between them. While the images could help to understand the signing, looking away caused the viewers to miss part of the signing. Hannes said: “I only have two eyes, I can't send each eye to a different side.” Similarly, Nadine stated:

Now I can only focus on one aspect. Perhaps if I take some more distance from the screen I could see both. But then I can't see the signs well enough, from a distance, and with the news interpreter I already have to struggle to be able to follow her.

When subsequently asked about their wishes and expectations for future newscasts, the participants asked for news with a Deaf newsreader, and preferred a coherent program instead of a quick, simultaneous but incoherent translation. Most said they preferred the news “in” instead of “with” VGT, i.e. not translated but originally produced and presented in VGT. They expressed a marked preference for a native user of VGT, preferably a DI, as they identified more strongly linguistically and culturally with a DI who seems to be “telling” the news instead of “translating” it. Anna said:
It's about identification. In the news with VGT I don't have the feeling that it's Deaf people's sign language. I think it's also because I know these news interpreters are not Deaf. Perhaps that's why I don't understand their sign language very well, I don't know. With the Karrewiet interpreter I really feel that connection.

Clearly, the preference for Deaf presenter is not only a practical question of comprehensibility but also, on a more principal level, a matter of connection and identification. This connects to some of the dimensions enumerated by De Meulder and Heyerick (2013) in defense of the use of a Deaf interpreter, in particular the linguistic dimension (Deaf interpreters have native fluency) and the cultural dimension (DIs are cultural insiders).

**Stage II**

In this stage of the research, three international cases were analysed in order to identify potential improvements to the current VRT format.

**BBC**

First, we analysed the British BBC which, among other things, offers the broadcast news with BSL (British Sign Language), produced by an independent production company, Red Bee Media. The researcher visited the company and interviewed the general manager of Sign Language Translation as well as a Deaf interpreter. At first, Red Bee Media used HIs, but since 2017 they are also able to use DIs for simultaneous interpreting, thanks to new technology which allows the live subtitling of the news which appears in the autocue of the DI.

In our interview, the general manager stated that it is important to also employ DIs, not only because they tend to have higher sign language proficiency and have a better grasp of the needs of Deaf viewers, but also to offer job opportunities for DIs and to raise awareness among Deaf viewers that Deaf people can do this job too. However, the people interviewed at Red Bee also enumerated some challenges involved in the use of DIs in live news broadcasts. First, the autocue text does not include the intonation and emotions of the speakers, which makes it more difficult for the DI to add nuances. Second, the DIs cannot deduce short breaks in speech from the subtitles available to them, so it is harder to pace the signing. Third, appropriate use of eye-gaze (grammatically used to add extra layers of meaning) is sometimes difficult because the DI needs to watch the autocue, so the only way to realize eye-gaze is to memorize part of the text.
Fourth, the high speed is a challenge for DIs, as it is for HIs, so they mostly have to focus on the autocue rather than the accompanying news images.

**DR**

Our second case, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation DR, offers two news and current affairs programs in Danish Sign Language, Dansk Tegnsprog (DTS), namely a regular newscast with a pool of HIs and DIs, and a summarized newscast with DIs. The signed interpretation in these programs is provided by production company Døvefilm, which the researcher visited and where he interviewed three Deaf employees: a program manager, an editor/presenter, and an editor/DI. This material was complemented by email correspondence with the hearing general manager of Døvefilm. Døvefilm uses a team of fifteen freelance interpreters, two of whom are Deaf.

In our correspondence, the general manager mentioned that viewers are very happy with the DIs, who are native sign language users and who are easily understood by the viewers. Both DIs do live interpreting of the news, as in the British case, but instead of autocue texts they get input from a hearing feed interpreter, as explained above. The advantage of this system, compared to the use of autocue texts, is that the feed interpreter can also signal intonation and emotions. The disadvantage, as with the autocue, is that the DIs cannot always focus on the image nor add correct eye-gazing, as they have to focus on the feed interpreter.

Beside a regular newscast with sign language translation, DR also offers a summarized twenty-minute newscast, *DR Ligetil - TEGN Nyt*, based on *DR Ligetil*, a simplified newscast for viewers who do not master Danish well, which is only available online. The text of this newscast is translated into DTS and presented by a Deaf news anchor. The clips are posted online, and a compilation of the clips also appears on DR as a summarized newscast. According to the editor/DI we interviewed, the key difference with the regular newscast with sign language is that sign language is introduced earlier in the production process of this summarized newscast, so it is less influenced by Danish.

By offering two options with differing degrees of complexity, DR can target different groups of viewers. Those who understand Danish better and like to watch the regular news at the same time as others, can choose the option with DTS-interpreter. Others can watch the summarized news in DTS. However, the Danish approach also has some drawbacks. First, the program manager mentioned that viewers complained about the lack of synchronicity between the signing and the news images as the feed interpreter creates some delay. This problem does not appear in the summarized newscast which does not have to follow the pace of the source
material and can offer textual support for fingerspelling, but here some viewers complained that
it was too short and not in-depth enough. Second, the production of two formats necessitates
more staff as there is a need for a feed interpreter (for the regular news) and a HI to support the
editing process (for the summarized news).

**SVT**

Our third case, Swedish public broadcaster Sveriges Television AB (SVT), offers two
kinds of news in Svenskt teckenspråk (TSP), Swedish Sign Language. Beside a regular
newscast with HIs, produced in Stockholm, they also have a summarized newscast with DIs,
which we discuss here. The researcher visited the studio in Falun, observed the production
process, and interviewed two Deaf presenters as well as a hearing editor. *Nyhetstecken*, a live
ten-minute newscast, has a Deaf anchor but also a hearing presenter in the studio who offers a
voice over presentation off camera. Another team of one Deaf and one hearing presenter-editor
produces separate clips which are published on the website and on Facebook, which also
features stories that do not fit into the short ten-minute newscast.

As in the Danish case, the Deaf anchor gets textual input through autocue, but in this
case the text is written specifically for this program, targeting Deaf viewers who have not
mastered Swedish well enough to follow the regular newscast with TSP. The news is also
specifically selected for this audience, if possible also including news about Deaf people and
their communities.

What is distinctive about *Nyhetstecken* is its duo of a Deaf and a hearing presenter, as
well as the fact that sign language is prioritized throughout the production process. For instance,
the hearing presenter has to wait for the Deaf presenter to finish rather than the other way
around. This offers many advantages, in particular the limited influence of Swedish on the way
the news is told, as it is not translated into but immediately narrated in TSP. However, the
interviewees also mentioned some challenges. For instance, they said it was sometimes difficult
to find the right balance between the key target group which does not master Swedish well, and
other viewers who do. The signing has to be clear, coherent and not influenced by Swedish, so
at times a term needs to be explained using several signs, which is possible as the presenter
does not have to follow the speed of a spoken text. However, one problem that did not occur
was that of synchronization, as they generally did not show moving images during the signed
presentation.

Despite differences in approach, these three cases all prioritize the needs of Deaf
viewers and in particular their need for comprehensible news. Two of the three cases, BBC and
DR, offer live translation with a DI, which has many advantages but some of the drawbacks remain: the high speed of the newscast, which makes it hard to provide complete interpreting, as well synchronization with the news images. As a consequence, information needs to be omitted for the news to remain intelligible and the sign language can be strongly influenced by the spoken source language, both as to content and as to grammar. Therefore, a dedicated news program tailored to Deaf viewers seems preferable, as the DR and SVT cases illustrate. Here, sign language is the guiding language offering a “Deaf framework”, which is most developed in the SVT case.

**Stage III**

Based on the insights gathered in the first two stages, we devised an alternative, summarized format for the Flemish newscast and produced a test episode. In this newscast, clips from the 7 PM *Het Journaal* were alternated with sections in VGT. To prepare for the recording, texts were written based on the newscast audio and the VRT news site, but rather than literally following the original newscast, the structure of the news item was adapted to more closely match the logical order of information in VGT. A native user of VGT was invited as presenter, with extensive experience as a TV interpreter and a good understanding of Dutch. To simulate a realistic production routine, and increase ecological validity (i.e. similarity to a real-world setting, Bryman 2004), the presenter only received the script upon arrival, when he had the opportunity to make some final adaptations, look up some terms and watch the clips. The presenter wore dark clothes and a dark blue background was chosen, to create a good contrast with the presenter's hands, based on comments by the participants with Usher who often found it hard to distinguish the interpreter's hands in the current VRT news with VGT. The news items were recorded individually, as in the Danish case, then edited into a fifteen-minute newscast. All fingerspelling was supported by captioning, but no other subtitles were used, except for foreign-language news clips.

After having seen this new format, all participants who had also given their opinion in stage I considered the new format as a great improvement. They stated that, given the choice, they preferred the new format “in” VGT over the existing news “with” VGT. They also said they understood the information in this new format much better, for several reasons which are connected to two sets of explanatory factors mentioned by Wehrmeyer (2015). First, on the level of the *interpreter*, all interviewees mentioned that the DI signed in a way that was easier for them to understand. They stated that his signing was correct, clear and polished, and hardly influenced by Dutch, as opposed to that of the HIs of *Het Journaal*. They also referred to the
cohesion of information, the key problem identified in research stage I. As mentioned above, during the preparation of the broadcast the structure of the news items was adapted to the logic of VGT, so participants understood the entire item instead of mere snippets of information. In the new format, participants could better distinguish the essential information, which made it easier to recall and recount the news content, which is how we checked their understanding.

These improvements on the level of the interpreter were connected to a number of improvements on a second level, the technical, i.e. the new format and production process. Thus, the issue of synchronization of signing with images was solved in the new format, as only still images were shown during the signing, so viewers did not need to divide their attention between news images and the interpreter. Most participants also found the speed of the signing good in the new format, in contrast to the excessive speed in the news with VGT, which had to follow the speed of the spoken text.

Overall, the interviewees found the new format much clearer, as this quote by Anna illustrates:

> In the past I completely watched the news with VGT, but now I start to fast forward because I can't follow the signs. Since our last interview I got interested in the news with VGT. At first, I thought it was my fault, that I didn't understand the news with VGT. But apparently, I'm not the only one. What a relief! I thought I was too stupid for this, to be able to follow the news with VGT. I thought my mind and knowledge were deteriorating. With the new format I feel much smarter!

**Discussion and conclusion**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), among other international and national regulations, stipulates that governments and broadcasters should allow Deaf people equal access to information. The most common solution is to make regular newscasts accessible by adding a sign language interpreter, mostly a hearing interpreter doing live interpreting. While this seems to be the evident norm, research shows that many Deaf viewers struggle to understand this kind of news. In Flanders, too, organizations by and for Deaf people and sign language users are critical of the public service broadcaster VRT's news offering with VGT. Hence, this paper reports on a study aiming to more systematically explore the experiences of Flemish Deaf viewers and, based on international best practices, to develop an alternative format.
In stage I we interviewed twenty Deaf people who were shown some clips from the current news with VGT. Regardless of their knowledge of Dutch, they struggled to understand the news items, for various reasons such as the lack of cohesion, lexical and grammatical mistakes, and the influence of Dutch on the signing. This was not only due to the fact that the HIs are not native users of VGT, but also to technical problems, in particular the high speed of the news and the lack of preparation time. The content and structure of the regular newscast is complex, which can lead to confusing signing. There is also too much visual input (the interpreter, news images, as well as subtitling) and the images and signs are not always synchronized, so the Deaf viewers we interviewed missed a lot of information. Beyond these technical and practical issues, however, there is also the more principal issue of identification. The Deaf people we interviewed identified more strongly with the Deaf interpreter in the Karrewiet clips, while the hearing interpreters confronted them more with the fact that they depended on a third person to follow the news.

Based on the analysis of international best practices in stage II of our research, and the development and testing of a new format in stage III, we make a number of recommendations for broadcasters to create inclusive newscasts for Deaf viewers. First, we recommend the use of a summarized newscast “in” sign language rather than a newscast “with” sign language. This corresponds most closely to the information needs of Deaf viewers, many of whom do not have access to other (written or aural) news sources. The news should be presented in a format with a clear structure, produced according to the language and information needs of Deaf viewers. Moreover, as Deaf viewers can only rely on one sense which watching the news, it is important that the signing is not disturbed by too many other visual stimuli such as images and subtitles.

Second, we recommend the use of a Deaf presenter. The earlier sign language is introduced in the production process, the better the quality of news in sign language. Having a Deaf person prepare and present the news, a native user of sign language, creates a better understanding but also more linguistic and cultural identification among the viewers. The latter is why for many Deaf people a Deaf interpreter is preferable to a CODA (child of deaf adults, i.e. a hearing person who grew up using sign language): it is not just a matter of comprehensibility, but also a matter of principle, giving jobs to Deaf people and giving them control and responsibility (De Meulder and Heyerick 2013; Stone 2009).

Third, we recommend close consultation between broadcasters and/or production companies on the one hand, and organizations by and for Deaf people and sign language users on the other. Sign language is a minority language, which needs protection and is dynamic, so it requires a high degree of expertise which is often lacking in broadcasting organizations. It is
also important to keep track of the evolving information needs and sign language skills among the Deaf population. This can be supported by outsourcing the production of news for Deaf viewers to external production companies, which are more closely aligned with the target audience, or at least by hiring Deaf people within the broadcasting organization and regularly consulting with Deaf and sign language associations.

Limitations

To conclude, a brief reflection on some of the limitations of this study. While executing this research, we experienced that the topic is extremely contentious. Although we built in as many checks and balances as possible, bias may have tainted our findings. First, the involvement of the Deaf researcher was a great advantage (and even a prerequisite) for this research, as he provided the necessary 'insider's perspective'. However, as he was strongly involved in media productions in VGT and had also worked at VRT, every research step was taken in close consultation with the supervisor of the project, an outsider in relation to the group and issues studied.

Second, while we did not target particular people for the interviews, our open call for participation may have attracted some people who were critical of the current VRT news offer. However, most interviewees expressed appreciation for the efforts done by VRT to offer news with VGT and wanted to provide useful feedback, so our overall sample was not biased in that respect.

Third, while we followed a strict interview protocol and avoided leading questions, social desirability may have played a role in the interviewees' negative appraisal of the current VRT offer in stage I and their positive appraisal of the alternative format in stage III, the latter in particular as they knew the researcher had developed this format.

As a consequence of these limitations, we cannot claim to offer the definitive answer to questions about sign language news comprehension. However, our findings in stage I did clearly confirm problems identified in Flemish and international research on the topic, while the solutions incorporated in the new format in stage III did clearly satisfy a random group of twenty interviewees. Moreover, in line with the disability rights slogan 'Nothing about us without us', our research gave a voice to the Deaf viewers themselves and also pleads for the inclusion of Deaf people in the production of TV programming for Deaf viewers. Overall, we are convinced that a more inclusive, custom-made format such as that produced by SVT is a good model for more comprehensible news formats in, rather than with, sign language.
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