Preserving Language: Challenges with ASL

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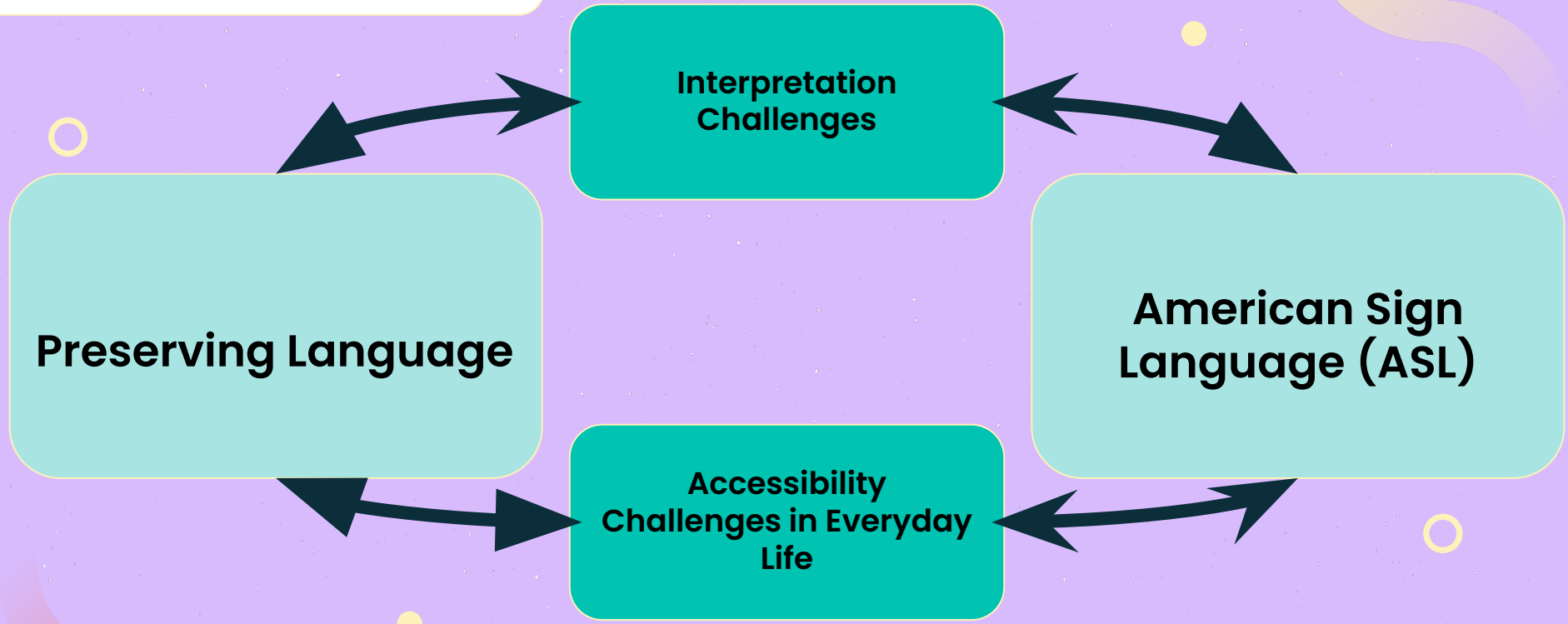
Selecting our Domain



Needfinding Methodology

Looking for Participants

1. **Non Stanford Students**
2. **Affiliated with the Deaf Community**
    a. Interpreters, native signers, students
3. **Diversity**
    a. Age, gender, ASL experience and background

We spoke to...

Melanie Lu
ASL Student
6 years of experience

Juanita Nickerson
ASL Interpreter
25 years of experience

Trin Nobles
ASL Student (hard of hearing)
3 years of experience

Kin Lin
Born deaf and native signer

We asked them...

What aspects of being an ASL interpreter do you find most rewarding and most challenging?

What motivated you to start learning ASL?

How do you define personal empowerment as a Deaf individual?

What linguistic or cultural aspects of ASL surprised you?

How has ASL played a role in your life and interactions with others?

Interview Results

Melanie Lu
ASL Student
6 years of experience

"She looked at me and she signed she was deaf, and I signed back to her. And her jaw dropped.

I just made a part of everyday life a little bit ***easier and more accessible*** for them."

"If your heart's not in it, don't do it.

Turn around and walk out the door."

"In this profession, you are

literally someone's voice."

Juanita Nickerson
ASL Interpreter
25 years of experience

Trin Nobles
ASL Student
3 years of experience

"Sign Language isn't just signed English. It's an adult language."

"Deafness has a whole culture around it.
It's not just a lack of hearing, it's also respect and learning from one another."

"People have misconceptions about deaf people like thinking that deaf people can't drive. We have eyes, we can see the road.

I don't let hearing people tell me that I can't do anything."

Kin Lin

Born deaf

Native ASL speaker

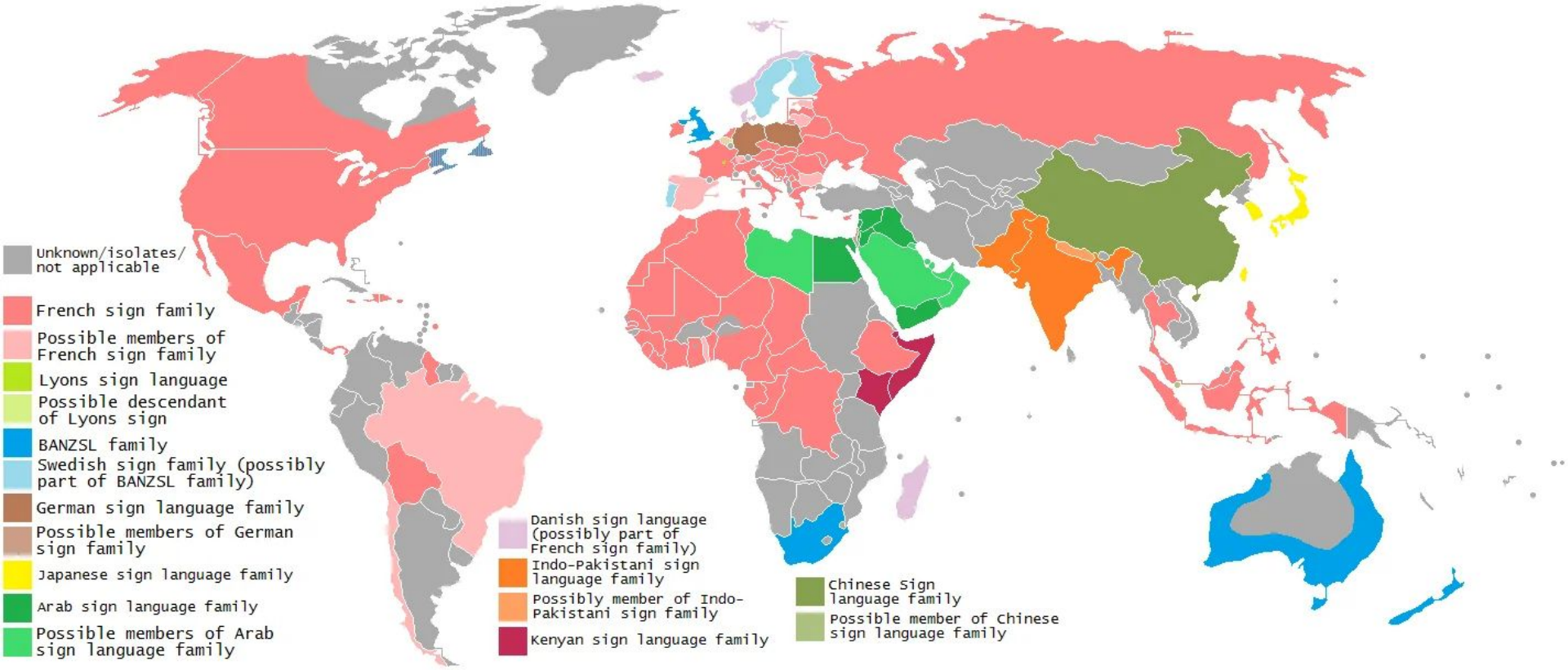
Analysis

Surprises

1. ASL is a **completely different language** from English. Thus, **conceptually accurate interpretations** (ASL) are not the same as **word for word translations** (Signed Exact English or SEE).

2. There is a halfway point between ASL and SEE called **PSE (Pidgin Signed English)** that follows **English syntax rules** but uses **ASL vocabulary**.

3. Sign languages are **not universal**, they are **regional**. While the US, England, and Australia are all English-speaking countries, each country has its own sign language. ASL is derived from French Sign Language.


Unknown/isolates/ not applicable
French sign family
Possible members of French sign family
Lyons sign language
Possible descendant of Lyons sign
BANZSL family
Swedish sign family (possibly part of BANZSL family)
German sign language family
Possible members of German sign family
Japanese sign language family
Arab sign language family
Possible members of Arab sign language family
Danish sign language (possibly part of French sign family)
Indo-Pakistani sign language family
Possibly member of Indo-Pakistani sign family
Kenyan sign language family
Chinese Sign language family
Possible member of Chinese sign language family

Contradictions

1. While some deaf people identify as **disabled**, others **push back against this label** as a form of self-empowerment.

2. Not all deaf people use **sign language**. Some (typically those with assistive technology or late-deafened individuals) use **alternate methods of communication like lip-reading**. Some use **both**.

3. Some deaf people prefer **literal translations** for the sake of preserving the original message while others prefer that interpreters focus on interpreting the **meaning behind the message**.

Accessibility symbols

for people with hearing loss

International Symbol of Access for Hearing Loss

Assistive listening devices

Telephone typewriter

Volume control telephone

Sign language interpretation provided

Closed captioning

Open captioning

Healthy Hearing
WWW.HEALTHYHEARING.COM

TENSIONS

1. Advanced ASL students that have a strong desire to continue learning often feel **stranded** if they **don't have a Deaf community** to immerse themselves in.

2. While interpreters are committed to access, **not every client will find them to be the right fit for them** (depending on accent, style, etc).

3. Interpreters often face **ethical challenges** when it comes to being a neutral party.

4. The barrier between the hearing and deaf community is a linguistic one, **rooted in the lack of a shared language**.

5. Some people find the distinction between **deaf** and **Deaf** to foster a **stronger sense of identify**, while others find it to be **divisive and invalidating**.
    a. "Lowercase d" deaf refers to the medical condition of hearing loss, while "capital D" Deaf refers to those who identify as not only physically deaf, but also take pride in being culturally Deaf.

Which one are you?
Aoyke 9-10

Melanie's Empathy Map

"I really want to be somewhere where on the daily, I'm forced to sign and communicate with people in the Deaf community."

"Deafness is not negative. It's not something we need to fix."

SAY ➡️

What are some quotes and defining words your user said?

"When I was in middle school, I watched a show that had an interpreter. And all I could focus on, the entire show, was the interpreter and not the show."

"My receptive skills aren't as good as my signing skills because I only know one deaf kid on this entire campus."

"Sign languages aren't officially recognized as national language. Some countries have an official language like Chinese in China, but it's really hard for sign language users to find their own community like that."

"I just made that part of everyday life a little bit easier and a little bit more accessible to those two girls."

"What really kept me going with the language was realizing the positive impact it had."

"She [customer] looked at me and signed that she was deaf, and I signed back to her. And her jaw dropped. They both got so excited."

"It's a spatial and temporal language that doesn't follow English structure."

"It's really hard for me to find someone to actually practice with and immerse myself in the language."

"Concept signs, regional signs. home signs aren't documented online so it would be hard for technology [AI] to recognize every single sign."

THINK ⛔

What might your user be thinking? What does this tell you about his or her beliefs?

That conceptual interpretations are more important than word for word translations

Facial expressions are crucial to conveying meaning in ASL.

How to continue to be involved in the deaf community

There are many misconceptions about the deaf community

The importance of being an advocate for the deaf community as an ASL student

Interpreting music is a nuanced and challenging subfield of interpretation.

There is a need for more visibility of ASL and the deaf community.

The needs and wants of deaf people are the priority in interpretation

Native signers are the best people to learn ASL from

Having access to a local deaf community would be helpful

ASL can't be captured by current AI language tools because it's so different from spoken languages

There is a need for more visibility of ASL and the deaf community.

Joy about her ability to make a positive impact and connect with deaf people

FEEL 🎨

What emotions might your subject be feeling?

A sense of accomplishment about her fluency level

Frustration regarding a lack of local deaf community

Yearning for a more immersive ASL environment

Fascination about the nuances of ASL

Eagerness to apply newly learned ASL concepts

Excitement about the creative liberties of interpretation

A sense of empathy towards deaf individuals

Perplexed at how an intro ASL class with a deaf professor works

Passion for making deaf people feel included

DO 💪

What actions and behaviors did you notice?

Took 6 years of ASL.

Practices song interpretation all the time. In the car, shower, etc.

Posts ASL song interpretation videos online

Willingness to assist new signers in communicating with deaf people

Volunteers at weekly deaf event @ Oakridge Mall

Utilizes dance background to better express self in song interpretations.

Maintains a friendship with the only deaf person she knows at school.

Maintains a friendship with the only deaf person she knows at school.

Switching to ASL when describing a particularly complex aspect of the language.

Smiling when talking about interactions with deaf people in her life

Insight:

ASL students feel like they've **hit a wall** when they reach the end of their ASL courses.

Without a space for continued practice and feedback, they are **unable to put their newfound knowledge to use** or **develop a higher level of fluency**.

Need:

ASL students need **post-course completion support** in finding an immersive environment where they can **consistently practice ASL** and **develop their relationship with the Deaf community**.

Juanita's Empathy Map

If we're talking about a solar system, and galaxy and gravity... how do you assign gravity? You can look it up on a book, but what does it look like? We have a board where we write words down, and ask each other how would you sign gravity.

When you go to college, you learn everything about the language itself: the adverbs, adjectives, why are they on your face? Why don't you have people make these strange faces? Why do interpreters use their tongue? So much goes into the language.

SAY

What are some quotes and defining words your user said?

Deaf people are very blunt.. They will let you know if they don't like you. "She's too hyper. She's too animated"

"I start to first classes like everyone else. It's easy, I'll take sign language. And then I realized that I sign wasn't the language. It's the facilitation of English on your hands, the representation of English on your hands. It's not a language. It doesn't have its own syntax and construction. And so when I realized that, and I met deaf adults in there, I realized this is a language and I passionately fell in love with it".

Each interpreter needs to know their skills and be ethically fit. They need to accept the assignments, only when they feel that they are qualified, not just for the money.

Every situation is a challenge. Working in a kindergarten class is challenging if you're used to doing college.

Likes the challenge of being able to walk into a situation, assess a situation, and be able to try and meet the needs of the client

Every deaf person you're not going to match with. That's a challenge. If your style is a little bit different, you need to immediately be able to say, okay I need to sign like this, because that matches that person... sometimes no matter how hard you try, they might not like your style.

"I've walked into a doctor's appointment before and there was going to be an abortion. What do you do there? You know what I mean? I walked into a gay place where somebody was being given the last race. Everyone's different and I think it's all a challenge, but all at the same time, the language is beautiful."

Each interpreter needs to know their skills and be ethically fit. They need to accept the assignments, only when they feel that they are qualified, not just for the money.

THINK

What might your user be thinking? What does this tell you about his or her beliefs?

Thinks it's important for interpreters to be cognizant of their skill/qualifications before accepting assignments.

Thinks it's important for ever interpreter to go through an ITP program to gain a deeper understanding of sign language

It's important for interpreters to comprehensively prepare before accepting assignments

Blunt critique in regards to interpreter compatibility / fit is frequent, and should not be taken personally

Becoming an interpreter is increasingly difficult due to stricter educational requirements and performance assessments. A good interpreter could test badly, and not pass

Interpreters must be ethically committed and willing to put in the time and effort.

When she started learning ASL, you didn't need a background to become an interpreter, but now it is a profession.

Interpreters must get a college education and take classes, that's the only way to understand the language

She thinks visually, in pictures.

Its crucial for learning that ASL learners use each other as resources

Thinks it's important to adapt to the signing styles of each deaf person to better accommodate their needs

FEEL

What emotions might your subject be feeling?

Love for ASL as a language as well as the community of people that use it

Grateful for the ability to sign in ASL and help those who are underprivileged with their needs/rights

Getting an education is crucial to becoming an ASL interpreter

A sense of duty to advocate for accessibility

Deaf people are very blunt and it is important to understand that.

Sign language is a language. It's the representation of language on your hands.

Likes the challenge in meeting the unique needs of each client

Proud of the effort she put in to get where she is today

Passionate that working with ASL must be ethical

ASL learners learn from each other.

DO

What actions and behaviors did you notice?

Use a variety of internet resources to better prepare herself for the unique challenges brought about by each assignment

Works/volunteers at her church

Works as a freelance interpreter in other environments (e.g. doctor's appointments)

Proactively gets resources from teachers to better prepare when interpreting in educational settings

Went to college and later an Interpretation Preparation Program (ITP) to learn more about sign / ASL

Acts passionately about her work as an ASL interpreter

Brainstorms with her team and other deaf aids/teachers to create ways to sign words that may be more difficult to present visually (e.g. gravity)

Communicates with her team and works closely with them depending on the applicability of their experiences to a current client

Works at a regular public elementary school that has a full deaf program for the Concord area

Working full-time as an educational interpreter since 1999

Insight:

The many **misconceptions about ASL and deafness** have a negative impact on Deaf people on an individual and societal level.

Need:

We need to **foster connections** between non-verbal and verbal speakers, promoting mutual understanding each other and access to everyday opportunities.

Summary

What we learned after interviewing 4 ASL users...

1. Deafness is more than a disability, it's a cultural and linguistic identity.
2. ASL is a nuanced language independent from English. The meaning of a sign can change depending on facial expression and speed.
3. It takes a lot of empathy and commitment to learn ASL, both for verbal and non verbal speakers.

What's Next?

1. Narrow down problem domain, focusing either on fostering community or enhancing language learning
2. Create HMW statements and experience prototyping
3. Interview more participants within our refined scope