



WFD AND WASLI STATEMENT ON USE OF SIGNING AVATARS

Updated 14 April 2018

[Click here for International Sign Version](#)

This statement from the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is concerned with the way in which decisions on where and when to use signing avatars as a form of access to spoken or written content is being managed by public authorities. The difference in linguistic quality between humans and avatars is why WFD and WASLI cautions against the use of signing avatars as a replacement for human signers. This statement is to advise on processes with how and when to determine appropriate use of signing avatars.

Signed languages are fully-fledged languages with their own complex structures that are distinct from spoken languages, and are not a communication tool. Thus a word-to-sign exact translation is not possible, as any translation needs to take into account the context and the cultural norms. Computer generated machine translations cannot render culturally appropriate translations as would be provided by live interpretations from a human sign language interpreter.

Computer generated 3D avatars have the potential to provide alternative opportunities to render publicly available information that is in written text or spoken into a signed language. Work in this field has seen great improvements with the image quality and appearance of signing avatars. Whilst the technology has progressed and offers real potential for wider use of signing avatars, these computerised products do not surpass the natural quality and skill provided by appropriately trained and qualified interpreters and translators. Individuals who are fluent in a signed language and qualified to present information on particular subjects not only use the hands, arms, shoulders and torso, movements of the head, facial expression and mouth patterns, but also include cultural information where necessary to convey the intended meaning contained within a message.

WFD and WASLI jointly express particular concern where avatars are used when the information being delivered is live, complex or of significant importance to the lives of deaf citizens such as news broadcasts, public emergency announcements, or political announcements.

To date, machine translations have yet to emulate the human ability in creating a live interpretation (spoken or signed). Currently, it is not possible to provide an accurate live interpretation via a signing avatar as:

1. Direct word-for-sign translations often do not exist. Achieving equivalence relies on more than just lexical word-sign matches. Any translation or interpretation must consider how to convey the message in terms of the lexicon (words/signs), grammar (structure), semantics (meaning) and discourse (language use).
2. Translators and interpreters take time to prepare in order to fully understand a message and to give consideration to their target audience. An automated translation will not be able to take other sociolinguistic and sociocultural factors into account in order to ensure that the intent of the message sender, and the goals of the message receiver, are achieved.
3. Collections of online sign language dictionaries are still emerging and do not contain full digitised corpus of possible signs (including variants stemming from different socio-linguistic categories), therefore there is not the digital resource available for generating signed statements by avatars.
4. Avatars provide a one way communication channel only from spoken to sign language and not vice versa.

We recognise that avatars might be used for pre-recorded static customer information, for example, in hotels or train stations where instructions might be given about where to check in or queue up. This is acceptable as long as deaf people have been involved in advising on the appropriateness of the signed sentences, and that there is no interaction or 'live' signing required.

Further background on the WFD Statement on Sign Language Work can be seen [here](#). This Statement emphasises that it is important for sign language work to be done with leadership of deaf native sign language users and WFD Ordinary members; it is important also to note that the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) requires governments to ensure that people with disability can express themselves freely, including in sign language. The WFD believes that any sign language work should reflect all the different signs used by a language community. Therefore, sign language dictionary work should always document all the different signs and their variations that deaf people in a community or area use. It is not advisable to pick only one sign for one word when documenting sign languages. The WFD and WASLI therefore does not support any formal standardization activities related to any sign language, but supports appropriately qualified linguistic research into and documentation of all sign languages in the world.

Acknowledgements

WFD and WASLI wish to thank the following people for their contribution to this statement; Mr Robert Skinner, Dr Jemina Napier, Ms Maya De Wit, Dr Phil Harper, Dr Debra Russell and Mr Colin Allen for their valuable input and Mr Christopher Tester for providing the international sign translation.

About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 135 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfd.fi

About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters

The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is an international non-governmental organisation representing sign language interpreters. Established in 2005, WASLI promotes the development of interpreting worldwide through formations of national interpreter associations, and lobby for effective training and standards of practice. WASLI's membership includes 40 national interpreter associations, 600 individual members, and supporting organisations). The WASLI operates with a volunteer board of directors, which includes the executive members and seven regional representatives. By promoting the professionalisation of sign language interpreting, deaf people's human rights can be supported through the provision of qualified and ethical interpreting services. The WASLI collaborates closely with the World Federation of the Deaf in order to advance issues of importance for both organisations. (<http://wasli.org/>) Email: secretary.wasli@gmail.com