

## Legal Interpreting Skill Development: Sight Translation

### What is SIGHT TRANSLATION?

Sight translation is the signed rendition of a text written in English into American Sign Language (ASL) and is usually done *in the moment*. Sight translation is sometimes requested - and should be regularly offered - during an interpreting assignment. It is a process that involves a hybrid of skills associated with translation and interpretation (National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, 2009).

### What are some basic GUIDELINES to follow?

- Given what interpreters know about reading levels within the Deaf population, it is important that interpreters are prepared and offer to provide sight translation of forms utilized as part of the legal system - particularly those forms seeking information and data from the Deaf individual and requiring the signature of the Deaf individual.
- If the document requiring sight translation involve complex legal concepts and/or is some sort of a contract or waiver, it is imperative that legal counsel be available when the sight translation is being generated so that information can be explained by legal counsel as needed/appropriate.
- Questionnaires can be done in an interactive manner - typically one question at a time. This allows for frequent verification of understanding. Documents that are descriptive or educational in nature should be chunked in sections and verification of understanding should be elicited after the translation of each section.
- Written documents are "one-way," often includes a lot of embedded clauses, uses titles, sub-headings, punctuation, and other formatting techniques to provide text organization that support meaning. As a result, the interpreter cannot totally separate what they are conveying from the document. Sitting close to the Deaf person, so you both can look at the document and the formatting, while segments are being conveyed, helps to relate what is being translated into ASL to what is in the written document.
- In order to be as effective as possible, become familiar with common types of forms that are used within the legal system and practice the sight translation. One of the benefits of sight translation is that you can take the time needed to convey meaning - you have the full picture before you start, and you have more control of the flow and pace at which information is conveyed. For this reason, although you want legal counsel available to answer questions that arise and to provide consultation if needed, you do not want dense texts read while you interpret. This will not yield a clear representation of the information, thus will not allow the interpreter to fulfill their duty of accuracy, equivalency, and accessibility.
- It is essential to know your audience and their language competence. This typically is best assessed by a Deaf interpreter. Adapt the ASL translation accordingly. Also, it is important to know when the process will not work due to linguistic limitations and to advise legal personnel accordingly.

### What skills are needed to do sight translation?

- Reading comprehension/analysis of source text meaning
- Fluency of cognitive processing skills and message transfer construction
- Ability to work accurately within time restraints

- Fluency of ASL production in target
- Ability to effectively elicit feedback and confirmation of understanding in culturally sensitive ways
- Ability to self-advocate for assistance (ex: more time, clarification of meaning, explanation of meaning, etc.) when needed

**Practice Exercises:** In the Toolkit there is a wide range of forms that are tied to a variety of criminal and civil court procedures. Utilize these forms for these practice activities.

1. **Reading for Content Comprehension:** Read a text aloud to a peer and then have that person ask you questions about its content. Compare understanding of what the text means.
2. **Chunking:** Choose a text and mark off the units of meaning in it. Focus on whole thoughts and main ideas. Compare your chunking with that done by a peer. What differences and similarities exist? Consider how much information you feel you can manage at a time for the purpose of translation. Work with chunks to practice sight translation. Seek feedback from a peer.
3. **Using Transcripts:** Perform chunking with one of the forms. Try to establish a hierarchy of importance of the units of meaning.
4. **Rephrasing:** Read a text aloud and rephrase it as you go along, taking care not to change the meaning. Repeat this with each chunk. When you feel comfortable that you understand the meaning in English, generate an ASL translation. Repeat the translation process until you feel the ASL rendition is sufficiently equivalent in meaning.

***Example:** Since political parties are found almost everywhere in Latin America, they would seem to be a common denominator in the region's political life. Yet this is not the case. Cultural, environmental, and historical influences on party development are so varied, they challenge conventional notions. Most nations hold periodic elections, but, like parties, the implications of elections may differ profoundly from those of our own culture.*

***Rephrased:** Because political parties can be found in just about every Latin American country, one might conclude that they are a common thread in the political life of this region. This is not so, however. There is such a great variety of cultural, environmental, and historical influences on the development of parties that commonly held ideas are contradicted. Elections are held periodically in the majority of countries, but the implications of these proceedings, like those of parties, are very different from the assumptions we can make in our own culture.*

5. **Expanding:** Read a text aloud and expand it (i.e., say the same thing in more words) as you are going along, again taking care not to change the meaning. Repeat this with each chunk. When you feel comfortable that you understand the meaning in English and can express its meaning in a variety of ways, generate an ASL translation. Repeat the translation process until you feel the ASL rendition is sufficiently equivalent in meaning and incorporates an appropriate level of ASL expansion techniques that support a visual-spatial representation of the message in more than one way.

**Example:** *In spite of what you may have heard, scientists are just like other people. A scientist walking down the street may look just like an insurance agent or a car salesman: no wild mane of hair, no white lab coat.*

**Expanded:** *Although you may have heard assertions to the contrary, there are no differences between scientists and people who are not in that profession. As a matter of fact, if you saw a scientist out for a stroll on the sidewalk, you might mistake him for a person who sells insurance, or an automobile dealer. Scientists don't all have wild manes of hair and they don't always wear white laboratory coats.*

6. **Condensing:** Read a text aloud and condense it (i.e., say the same thing in fewer words) as you go along, retaining the same meaning. Repeat this with each chunk. When you feel comfortable that you understand the meaning in English and can express its meaning in an explicit and concise manner, generate an ASL translation. Repeat the translation process until you feel the ASL rendition is sufficiently equivalent in meaning and is explicit and concise.

**Example:** *The multiplicity of cues which are utilized in the categorizing and sorting of the environment into significant classes are reconstructed from the strategies and modes of coping with the problems presented to the subjects. In many situations, no certainty can be achieved; the varying trustworthiness and merely statistical validity of the cues frequently make inferences only probable.*

**Condensed:** *Many cues are used to classify the environment. They are reconstructed from the subject's problem-solving strategies. Often, because the cues are not uniformly reliable and are valid only statistically, the results are not certain.*

7. **Adjusting the Register:** Read a text aloud and alter the register or language level as you go along, being careful not to stray from the original meaning. Repeat this with each chunk. When you feel comfortable that you understand the meaning in English and can express its meaning in a variety of registers, generate an ASL translation with an eye towards expressing it in various registers (by adjusting your vision of who you are translating the text for). Repeat the translation process until you feel the ASL rendition is sufficiently equivalent in meaning and you are comfortable in adapting the register.

**Example:** *As I was driving to work in the morning, I noticed that the stop sign, which used to be on the corner of Main and 1st had been removed.*

**Higher Level:** *Upon transporting myself to my place of employment in a motor vehicle at some point in time prior to noon, I observed that the insignia to cause motorists to bring their vehicles to a stationary position, which had formerly been stationed at the intersection of the thoroughfares known as Main and 1st, had been displaced.*

**Lower Level:** *On my way to work in the morning, I saw that they took out the stop sign that used to be at Main and 1st.*

8. **Triad Practice - Explanatory Texts:** This exercise works well with forms that are providing an explanation of services or processes. When working in a small group of three, rotate roles of 1) interpreter doing the sight translation, 2) consumer of the translation, and 3) observer comparing the translation with the written English text in preparation for providing feedback. The interpreter and observer will each have a copy of the text. The consumer will not. The observer will provide feedback to the interpreter about the accuracy of the translation and the equivalency in meaning between the written text and the ASL translation. The consumer will provide feedback to the interpreter regarding comprehensibility and meaning. The interpreter can discuss what was challenging about the text, the effectiveness of the strategies they used, and what they might do differently were they to do a sight translation of the text a second time. If time permits, allow the interpreter to re-do the translation to incorporate the feedback. Then, rotate roles until each individual in the triad has an opportunity to engage in the sight translation process. As you rotate, change the text so that each interpreter is working with a different text.
9. **Triad Practice - Interactive Texts:** This exercise works well with questionnaire forms that require the consumer to provide answers to questions. When working in a small group of three, rotate roles of 1) interpreter doing the sight translation, 2) consumer of the translation, and 3) observer comparing the translation with the written English text in preparation for providing feedback. The interpreter and observer will each have a copy of the text. The consumer will not.

The interpreter will collect information from the consumer using the form and providing a sight translation of each question on the form. So, the process is interactive - the interpreter sight translates the questions and the consumer provides answers to those questions. The consumer may put down the written answer and/or the interpreter could record the answers provided by the consumer.

The observer will provide feedback to the interpreter about the accuracy of the translation and the equivalency in meaning between the written questions in the text and the ASL translation. The consumer will provide feedback to the interpreter regarding comprehensibility and meaning of the sight translations. The interpreter can discuss what was challenging about the sight translation process and the question forms, the effectiveness of the strategies they used, and what they might do differently were they to do a sight translation of the text a second time. If time permits, allow the interpreter to re-do the translation to incorporate the feedback. Then, rotate roles until each individual in the triad has an opportunity to engage in the interactive sight translation process. As you rotate, change the text so that each interpreter and consumer is working with a different text.

## Reference

National Council on Interpreting in Health Care. (2009). *Sight translation and written translation: Guidelines for healthcare interpreters* [White paper].  
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