French Sign Language/French Translation Studies in France: A Mini Review

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In this mini review, we present an overview of existing research in French sign language (LSF)/French translation studies in France. The practice of LSF/French interpreting is ancient, since traces of it can be found in the High Middle Ages, but its professionalization is more recent (it dates from the Deaf Revival of 1975–1995). The profession of French to LSF translator is even more recent: it dates from about 10 years ago. Following this professionalization, translation studies research emerged about 30 years ago. It has been developing particularly over the last 20 years, driven by university programs (MA in LSF/French interpretation and translation). This research is multifaceted and is not confined to a single discipline. Indeed, translation studies are inherently multidisciplinary, and we can find references to translation and interpretation in historic, linguistic, sociologic, or computer science studies, among others. Moreover, translation studies are also part of different schools of thought, which can be explained historically. In this paper, we present an overview of translation research concerning LSF/French interpretation and translation (practiced by both deaf and hearing people) in France. We also address the prospects for further developments, related to the emergence of new practices, and the question of the didactic applications of these different researches in the field of interpreters and translators training within 5 universities in France.

Keywords: French sign language, LSF, French, interpretation, translation, translation studies

INTRODUCTION

There are several definitions of translation studies, ranging from a very narrow focus on interpretative techniques to a very broad multidisciplinary perspective[1]. In this article, which concerns LSF/French translation studies[2], we consider translation studies to be the scientific study of translation/interpretation and all that is related to it, both in theoretical and practical terms, in a Deaf Studies vein. Because of the size limitation of this article, we do not intend to present an exhaustive list of translational research in France today. Instead, we have chosen to present a general overview of this issue, historically contextualized, and the links with education and ongoing or planned research.

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[1]This text was translated into English with the help of Madeleine Papiernik.
[2]In both ways: from French to LSF and from LSF to French.

A CONTEXTUALIZED RESEARCH

Translation studies research in France is historically linked to the emergence of the interpreting and translating professions and is based on linguistic and translation models but it is also based on ideas developed within the training courses. It is the importance of these complementarity fields that we wish to highlight.

History of LSF/French Interpretation and Translation

The oldest traces of interpretation in France between sign language (SL) and French date back to the High Middle Ages (Cantin, 2021, p. 17–30). This shows us that this practice is very old. The interpreters mentioned in the sources were not paid professionals at that time. They were hearing people, close to and in contact with deaf people: friends, family, neighbors, or monks when the deaf person lived in a Catholic order, who were called upon to act as interpreters when necessary. From the eighteenth century onwards, the deaf began to be more educated, thanks to the creation of a school by the Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Epée (1712–1789). From the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, the sources mention interpretations made by deaf people themselves (senior students or teachers), who had the best mastering of written French and who could use this medium to interpret to less educated deaf people. Their interpretation was accepted by the courts, then the town halls and other jurisdictions (Encrevé, 2012: 58, p. 149–152). Linguistic and translation research as we understand it today did not exist at that time. However, there were reflections and actions, such as those of Auguste Bébian (1789–1839, for linguistic description) or those of Ferdinand Berthier (1803–1886). Berthier was a deaf teacher at the National Institution for the Deaf and Mutes in Paris, he was an interpreter, writer and famous activist for the rights of the deaf to use SL in all fields via competent (deaf) interpreters. Unfortunately, the Congress of Milan of 1880 was followed very strictly in France, which resulted in the banning of SL from deaf schools (Encrevé, 2012, p. 297–322). As a result, schools for the deaf could no longer provide interpreters: deaf teachers were dismissed and hearing teachers were no longer taught SL. Therefore it was once again the relatives of the deaf who served as interpreters. The following decades, with two world wars and economic crisis, did not bring about any major changes for deaf people or SL and interpreters (Bernard et al., 2007).

Everything changed with the Deaf Revival, a deaf protest movement that started in 1975 (Cantin et al., 2019, p. 148–151). Deaf people and hearing people who supported them (academics, artists, speech therapists, teachers, interpreters and parents of deaf children) asked for the right to use SL (renamed LSF in 1978) in all fields, including education. LSF began to be taught to hearing people, thus opening the door to future generations of interpreters with no close ties to the deaf. The interpreting profession also began to structure itself (Encrevé, 2014, p. 9–11): the interpreters' association was created in 1978, under the name "National Association of Interpreters for the Hearing Impaired". It is now called the "French Association of Sign Language Interpreters and Translators" (AFILS). This semantic evolution is significant: the interpreters who created the association were still close to deaf people, motivated by the idea of helping the disabled, not yet aware of the linguistic value of SL (like many deaf people themselves), trying to bring SL closer to the standard of written French (Séro-Guillaume, 1994, p. 40), and working on a voluntary basis. Today's interpreters are paid and trained professionals who work between two languages and two cultures. As a sign of this evolution, in 1988 the association adopted a code of ethics which still governs professional practice today. The first interpreter training courses were created in the 1980s and today there are five universities that each deliver a master's degree in LSF/French interpretation: Lille, Paris 3 (ESIT), Paris 8, Rouen and Toulouse (Encrevé, 2014, p. 13). The profession of translator has emerged even more recently, thanks to the opening of a dedicated training course at the University of Toulouse in 2005 (essentially for translators into LSF, i.e., deaf people) and it has since been supplemented by a training course at the University of Paris 8 since 2020 (which provides training in both languages but which wishes to develop translation into French). The profession of translating has grown simultaneously with the development of analogical then digital video, providing a new medium in which SL could be "written" (Gache, 2014). Today, despite the lack of official data, we estimate that there are around 600 qualified interpreters and 10 trained translators.

Translation Studies Research and Its Relevant Theoretical Models

Because of this recent professionalization, translation studies research emerged mainly since the year 2000. For historical reasons, universities training courses for interpreters are offered both in specialized interpretation and translation centers (D-TIM at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, ESIT at the University of Paris 3) and in linguistics studies departments (Universities of Paris 8, Rouen and Lille; Encrevé, 2014; Garcia and Burgat, 2016). Therefore, they are driven on the one hand by linguistic models of LSF and on the other hand by translation models of all languages. In France, Christian Cuxac and his collaborators are developing, at the University of Paris 8, the semiological approach, which occupies a central position in the LSF linguistics (Garcia and Sallandre, 2020). Cuxac progressively built his approach from the study of the deaf community, its language and the education of deaf children (Cuxac, 1983, 2000), then he proposed a complete SL description model. This approach aims at explaining the structural functioning of SL and demonstrating the linguistic value of iconicity. It supposes that iconicity is a core system but is also a view of the world based on a practical perception of reality. Indeed, it shows that deaf people, because of their deafness, apprehend the world only via the visual-gestural channel rather than the audio-phonatory channel, which impacts the linguistic structures of the language. The semiological approach is a linguistics analysis, based on a corpus of deaf people's spontaneous production, which has developed its own tools to update the linguistic categories of this language. It is the opposite of previous linguistics works which aimed to try to describe the SL through the framework of spoken languages, by excluding their specificities, especially iconicity (Stokoe, 1960).

The semiological approach is followed by three university courses for interpreters out of the five existing in France: Paris 8, Rouen and Toulouse, and is complemented by a multidisciplinary approach to deaf studies: history, sociolinguistics, didactics, etc.

The other training programs follow different models. University of Lille is in line with international research on SLs in cognitive linguistics, based on the syntactic studies developed by Risler (2000) and based on Anglo-Saxon works (e.g., Liddell, 2003). The singularity of the training offered by ESIT at the University of Paris 3 is that it is not based on a particular linguistic model. It uniquely adopts the translational theories of speech languages, trying to show how LSF can fit into the same framework (Pointurier-Pournin, 2014). Concerning translation models, the various training courses consider that the heart of the translating activity is the meaning. They all refer to the interpretive theory of translation (Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1984), which invites the interpreter and the translator to understand (deverbalize) and then re-express (Burgat, 2014). They all rely on Gile's (1995) model of efforts to train on simultaneous interpretation. This model has been reworked for SL interpreting to define "6 stages of interpreting mechanisms," used by the training courses of Lille, Paris 8, Rouen and Toulouse (Bernard et al., 2007, p. 86–87). The Paris 8 and Toulouse courses also follow Katharina Reiss' theory on text types, combined with Hans Vermeer's *skopos* theory (Reiss and Vermeer, 1984). While the Paris 3 (ESIT) course prefers Philippe Séro-Guillaume's principles (Séro-Guillaume, 1994) combined with the *skopos* theory. It should be noted that the translator courses at the universities of Toulouse (opened in 2005 and becoming a master's degree in 2021) and Paris 8 (opened as a master's degree in 2020) follow the same linguistic and translational models as the associated interpreter courses (Leroy et al., 2019).

Research-Training Links

Because research on LSF has promoted deaf language and understood its profoundly iconic nature, most training programs encourage young interpreters to produce their interpretations in the most iconic LSF variant possible, rather than in a version closer to French (Burgat and Encrevé, 2015; Burgat, 2021). For all of them, interpreting in signed French is not acceptable, and students need to move away from linear SL and train to express themselves in the most spatial, iconic, and expressive SL as possible. Variations exist depending on the linguistic models favored. In spite of their differences, all these training courses ensure a similar way of interpreting practices and define the identity of the interpreting profession. Deaf speakers are considered as speakers of a language in its own right (with the same linguistic value as a vocal language), considered as equal as hearing speakers and not as people with deficits. This results in a specific positioning of the French/LSF interpreters taught in training: they are professional interpreters, who are not helpers, nor teachers for the deaf, nor social workers. The interpreters' professional practice contributes to allow deaf people to fully take their place in the interaction. By respecting their autonomy rather than by doing things in their place, deaf people are viewed as equal to hearing people.

Today, the number of researchers in LSF translation studies (many of whom are certified interpreters) is still low in France, but it is increasing. With this in view, research by teachers and students should be seen as complementary, as many masters' thesis complements professional research in French translation studies. Approximately 40 dissertations are written each year by interpreters and translators' students. We have explored about a hundred student master's thesis over the last 20 years, in all universities. There are a large number of dissertations on the different fields of intervention of French/LSF interpreters (medical, legal, social, health...), on specializations (VRI, tactile LSF...) or on specific audiences (migrants, deaf people with associated disorders...). Other subjects which are widely studied are focused on professional aspects, such as the evolution of the interpreter's profession from an historical point of view, working conditions, professional illnesses, the economy of the interpreter's profession, professional retraining, but also legal, ethical and deontological, and technical aspects (deverbalization, schematization, cognitive functioning of the interpreter...). We can also see that students are concerned about deaf and hearing users by the number of dissertations in sociolinguistics (language variants and registers in interpreting, language contacts, diglossia, etc.). There are not many dissertations on the structural functioning of the LSF. Three of the five interpreters' master's degrees are integrated into linguistics programs. But because the master's degrees are accessible with a bachelor's degree not necessarily in linguistics, dissertations on linguistics and interpreting are in the minority overall (they tend to focus on lexical units: terminology, lexical creation, etc.). Finally, there are very few dissertations which deal with pragmatics (interpretation and implicit or stereotyped language/ambiguous speak and interpretation...). Of course, this list is not exhaustive. These master's thesis are creating new avenues of research, to be explored deeply, and to be valued and promoted in the scientific community. These new and diverse subjects show an ever-growing change within the profession and the research around it.

DISCUSSION AND POTENTIAL FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Research in LSF/French translation studies is constantly being enriched by new fields; we present two of the most polemic subjects at the moment.

The first field is research in automatic SL processing between French and LSF, regarding translation and interpretation, which is mainly conducted by the M&TALS[3] team in the LISN[4] laboratory from the Paris Saclay University. It began with Annelies Braffort PhD thesis in 1996 (Braffort, 1996) whose aim was to recognize and try to understand gestures from LSF. Almost 25 years later, the thesis of Segouat (2010) was about translating from French to LSF using a virtual signer (i.e., a virtual character

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[3]Modélisation et traitement automatique des langues des signes, https://tals.limsi.fr/ (06/07/21).
[4]Laboratoire interdisciplinaire des sciences du numérique, https://www.lisn.upsaclay.fr/ (06/07/21).

performing SL) for the french railway transportation system. The aim of the thesis was to build a system parallel to the vocal one, that would use small pieces of pre-animated SL (instead of vocal ones) to give the information in SL thanks to a virtual character. For this system to be producing a quite natural language, the author focused on the study of the coarticulation phenomena, which is the ability of linking pre-recorded pieces of language and rendering them in the most natural way. Therefore, these pieces may have to be modified to be linked together, and the modification differs depending which piece you link to another. This was not really a translation system, but it was a first study of how LSF could be generated automatically and naturally from pre-built animations.

Nowadays, the M&TALS team is focusing on translation systems in different ways. Firstly, thanks to a specific corpus analysis,[5] they have identified several production rules. These rules allow one to juxtapose signed units. They also have described how these rules could be used as a system to model an entire utterance in LSF, fully respecting the simultanity of the language. Members of the team[6] also worked on providing tools to help translators' work, in the field of computer aided translation (CAT). They started from identifying the necessary steps in the text-to-sign translation process: they filmed translators (both deaf professionals and hearing interpreters) in their work, from reading text for the first time to the delivery of a translated result. Several tasks were identified, and some did not fit the process proposed in existing CAT systems, such as the principle of linearity, which is the fact that one text translated to another can be segmented into parts that will be in the same order in both texts, the translated one and the translation. It appeared that a big step of the process consisted of re-organizing ideas from the text so that the SL version was no longer alignable with the original source. They also suggest adapting a concordancer to SL to serve as a translation archive, meaning that when the translator has finished their translation work, they need to link translated parts of their work and store them in a database. Afterwards, they and other translators can access this database to query and re-use these translations. The same authors also conducted a study on how the interface of a CAT designed to be used with SL should looks like.[7] They provide within their designed interface a way to re-organize ideas from the text to the SL version. Their idea is to use blocks which users can manipulate visually and can put text, picture, maps and manual drawing. The blocks can be used as a prompter while the translator if filming themself for the final product. Moreover, the interface would also provide an encyclopedic assistance for lexical searches, such as looking-up definition, map search, picture search, and encyclopedic searches for context. Their first prototype is currently under development and is about to be available online for professionals to test. Kaczmarek and Filhol set up the concordancer and made it available online[8], it is said to be potentially useful in teaching LSF but also in teaching translation and interpretation methods by displaying lists of examples and counterexamples of translations, as it shows aligned parts in French text and LSF. The M&TALS team is also involved in various research projects, such as Rosetta[9] and EASIER[10]. Both of these projects have no results nor publications yet.

The second field is the position of deaf interpreters in France. The development of the interpreting and translating professions history, shows that the three main functions performed by one deaf interpreter in the Anglo-Saxon world are practiced by two to three different people in France. These three professions are: translation into LSF (a profession in its own right, master's degree), international sign/LSF interpreting (a function for the time being performed by translators or not, with no diploma at this time), and intermediation (a profession in its own right, master's degree). This separation between these functions works well and there is a good relationship between hearing interpreters, deaf translators, and interpreters. For a few months now, two translators (trained in co-interpretation at the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters via the technique known as "feeding" in the Anglo-Saxon world), have been experimenting with live and recorded interpreting in pairs with hearing interpreters. The practice is still being debated and needs to be better defined but its use is being developed. Master's thesis and research articles are being written on this issue (Cantin and Encrevé, 2022, in press), which is why we cannot go into further detail.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we have attempted in a reduced format to present an overview of LSF/French translation studies research in France, which is a growing discipline. Thanks to the increasing number of deaf students, leading to potentially more deaf researchers, we can hope that research related to SL in France will lead to a better recognition of deaf people, their language and the professions of translator and interpreter.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SB, FE, and JS make substantial contributions to the conception. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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[5]See Mohamed Hadjadj, Michael Filhol, Annelies Braffort. Modeling French Sign Language: a proposal for a semantically compositional system. International Conference on Language Resources and Eval-uation, ELRA, May 2018, Miyazaki, Japan: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01848986/document (06/07/21).

[6]See Marion Kaczmarek, Michael Filhol. Computer-assisted Sign Language translation: a study of trans-lators' practice to specify CAT software. Workshop on Sign Language Translation and Avatar Tech-nology (SLTAT), Sep 2019, Hamburg, Germany: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02923914/document (06/07/21).

[7]See Marion Kaczmarek, Michael Filhol. Assisting Sign Language Translation: what interface given the lack of written form and the spatial grammar? Translating and the Computer, Tradulex, Nov 2019, Londres, United Kingdom: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02924671/document (06/07/21).

[8]https://platform.postlab.fr (06/07/2021).

[9]https://rosettaccess.fr/ (06/07/2021).

[10]https://www.project-easier.eu/fr/ (06/07/2021).

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