



## WFD-WASLI Accredited International Sign (IS) Interpreters

### 1. What is International Sign (IS) interpreting? Who does IS interpreting?

[Click here for International Sign](#)

International Sign (IS) interpreting is provided for international government organisations such as the United Nations, a supranational mechanism such as the European Union. IS is also used in other contexts such as international or regional events where there are deaf participants using different sign languages and for some reason/s, it is not possible to provide interpreting services in each of these sign languages. The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) endorse the engagement of persons who have been **accredited** by the WFD-WASLI International Sign Accreditation System. This includes deaf interpreters who are accredited by WFD-WASLI as translators and as interpreters.

While the cost of hiring accredited interpreters may seem high, the consequences of inadequate interpretation are higher. Deaf people participating in high-level meetings and public events will only be able to access the information and share their perspectives when the quality of interpretation is of the highest calibre. Using non-accredited IS interpreters can effectively lead to a breach of human rights, limited or no participation from deaf delegates as well as legal and/or financial implications which potentially could include the need to refund conference fees, negative media attention and funds squandered on the provision of inadequate services.

An example of IS performed well is the webcasts offered by the UN in New York of using only WFD-WASLI accredited interpreters. In order for deaf people's human rights to be realised, information must be made available in sign language by professional<sup>1</sup> interpreters. This is reinforced in [CRPD Article 9.2 \(e\)](#):

*(e) Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public;*

Nothing less is acceptable. If your organisation is considering using non-accredited IS interpreters, we encourage you to contact us prior to the event so that we can work with you to determine alternative solutions.

### 2. How do people become IS interpreters?

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Individuals can become accredited through the WFD-WASLI International Sign Interpreter Accreditation System. A prerequisite is that the person holds formal recognition with a recognised national professional registration body of sign language interpreters, or have completed a relevant university degree. The accreditation aims to set, maintain and promote standards in International Sign interpretation as detailed in the '[WFD-WASLI International Sign Interpreter Recognition Interim Policy and Guidelines](#)'. It acts as a quality-assurance system for credentialing practitioners who meet those standards. The accreditation also strives to create and maintain a lifelong professional development system. In doing so, it officially recognises practitioners who have had extensive working experience in the international arena and awards them with the accreditation for a period of five years. See here for further details: <https://wfdeaf.org/news/wfd-wasli-international-sign-interpreter-accreditation-system/>.

In some countries, some interpreter training courses may include a module in IS although typically this is taught with the intention of ensuring international visitors can access national services. This is not sufficient to undertake international related interpreting work where WFD-WASLI accredited interpreters should be hired. We encourage organisations wishing to support the development of future accredited interpreters to seek opportunities where experienced and accredited interpreters can work with and mentor aspiring IS interpreters. This will then expand the pool of IS interpreters to meet the growing demand.

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<sup>1</sup> Professional interpreters are those with training and experience, and are accredited as interpreters by national and or regional professional bodies.

Finally, like all professionals who are highly trained, accredited interpreters need to be compensated appropriately in line with the education and experience of the interpreter and in accordance with national rates. Travel, accommodation and other related costs will also need to be covered.

### 3. Are deaf people able to become accredited IS interpreters?

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The WFD-WASLI accreditation system is available to all interpreters that meet the pre-requisite hours and training regardless of hearing status. At the present time, nearly half of the accredited interpreters are deaf. These interpreters work in teams with hearing interpreters or in some situations, may work in contexts working from text/captions or between sign languages. Working with deaf interpreters has been successful for UN webcasts, international conferences and small meetings.

### 4. Can local interpreters be taught IS so they can interpret for conferences that are hosted in their region?

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There are many people who believe that they are fluent in IS or that it is easy to become so for the purposes of a conference. The goal of these Frequently Asked Questions is to provide the reader with much more information about the reality of learning and interpreting in IS.

## Frequently Asked Questions about International Sign<sup>2</sup>

- **What is International Sign (IS)?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

When deaf people from different language backgrounds meet, they are much more easily able to communicate with each other in comparison to hearing people from different language backgrounds when they first come into contact. In the absence of the one universal sign language, how is this possible?

Writings about early civilisations indicate that deaf people have been communicating by gesture or signs from 5th century BC. There is evidence of Greek, Roman and Jewish philosophers writing about deaf people, their place in society, their status in law and how they lived their daily lives. For as long as there have been deaf communities around the world, deaf people from these communities have come into contact with others from other communities (Woll and Adam, 2012).

It is necessary to look closely at the ways in which deaf people interact when they do not share a sign language. Zeshan (2015) discusses **cross-signing** which looks at the types of linguistic resources signers use when they are in face-to-face gatherings and “create meaning” together. The second is the use of **International Sign (IS)** at gatherings of deaf people throughout the world. International Sign, as described below, is not a language, but rather a set of conventions used at international events that some authors have said are pidgin-like. Translanguaging is a dynamic language practice, in which people use their own language and semiotic resources, visual signs, gestures, by “signing, gesturing, speaking, mouthing, writing (in the air, on paper, on hands or arms), typing (on mobile phones, on calculators, on computers), fingerspelling in different (named) languages, or pointing at text” De Meulder et al 2019: 2). Both cross-signing and IS are examples of translanguaging which uses iconic structures along with the use of signs from more than one sign language (De Meulder et al, 2017).

- **Where does IS come from?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

This transnational contact continues to this day. The international Deaf Community is highly mobile and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are regular international events, including the World Congresses of WFD, Deaflympics Games, and other international and regional events. The WFD has at 2019, 122 ordinary members (national associations of deaf people)<sup>3</sup> covering all continents of the world, and the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) has 113 national sports federations<sup>4</sup> as members. Both organisations were established in Europe, the ICSD in Paris, France in 1924 and the WFD in Rome, Italy in 1951. Additionally, social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube enable deaf people to record and upload video clips of themselves signing for other deaf people from within and outside their country to watch. Finally, deaf people are mobile global citizens who travel the world and meet other deaf people from other sign language communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Prepared by Robert Adam, Coordinator, WFD Expert Group on Sign Language and Deaf Studies

<sup>3</sup> <http://wfdeaf.org/who-we-are/members/wfd-members/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.deaflympics.com/countries>

- **Is IS a language?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The term IS, rather than *International Sign Language* or *International Signs*, indicates that IS *does not* have full linguistic status but is a translanguaging practice. In a survey of its member countries, the WFD found that its representatives did not consider IS to be a full language<sup>5</sup>. Also, even though it is used in cross-language communication, it is not possible to compare IS to Esperanto as IS is not a planned language with a fixed lexicon and a fixed set of grammatical rules; *Gestuno: International Sign Language of the Deaf* was an unsuccessful attempt in the 1970s by the WFD along with the British Deaf Association to create a standardised artificial international sign language.

This cross-linguistic communication has also been described as a pidgin (Quinto-Pozos and Adam, 2013, Quinto-Pozos and Adam, 2015). It is not as possible to discuss complex concepts using sign pidgins as it is with sign languages, particularly for people who have not had prior experience of any cross-language contact. When two deaf people of differing language backgrounds meet, a situational pidgin arises, and both people use their own linguistic and gestural resources as well as their knowledge of cross-language contact to communicate. The more contact signers have contact with signers from different language backgrounds, the more familiar they become with different ways of communicating, iconic signs and visual resources. This process also includes semantic broadening and narrowing of individual signs based on this contact.

Even though IS is considered a pidgin without any native signers or evidence of extended continuous usage, it has been found to have a more complex structure than are found in pidgins. In a study on the grammar of IS, Supalla and Webb (1995) report finding subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, five types of negation, and verb agreement. This is most likely due to the similar visual and spatial structures of the sign languages in contact. Studies of IS have largely involved contact among European sign languages (including American Sign Language (ASL), which is of European origin) and this may provide a misleading picture, especially as many European sign languages are a part of the *langue des signes française* (LSF) family of sign languages. An important question that has not been discussed is that it is not clear how effective IS is for deaf people from Asia and Africa. Nevertheless, it is used at international gatherings of deaf people where it has also been found to be longer in duration and slower in production. This has implications for those seeking to provide interpretation in IS at international meetings.

- **Is International Sign (IS) the same all around the world?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

International Sign (IS) is a translanguaging practice used between signers from different countries and it is not a specific sign language such as ASL or British Sign Language (BSL). Since signs can change depending on who is talking to who, there is variation when used for private communication. Thus, deaf people from different places in the world use different signs for when communicating with deaf people from other places.

Sign languages have had extensive contact with emblems which have then become incorporated as signs. Emblems are a form of co-speech gesture and thus they vary from culture to culture.

However, because the development of IS has centered around Europe, European IS is often used in international conferences. In addition, American Sign Language has had a strong influence on the development of IS. Therefore, there is a need for continued discussions about the future direction of IS.

By participating in IS events around the world, people have many opportunities for international exchange and communication and can gradually begin to acquire IS. However, deaf people who are not usually in such environments may need to seek out a place where intentional learning is undertaken. For people who do not have opportunities to attend such events, they can search for “International Sign” on YouTube and find many video clips. Social networking sites such as Facebook are also platforms for immersion in IS through involvement in international communication media. These online opportunities are increasing every year.

- **How can a person learn IS?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The best advice for learning IS is (1) to actually be fluent in at least one sign language, and (2) to actually see and meet people using it. This is possible by watching people signing on social media or going to international events and meet with other deaf people with whom a common sign language is not shared. It will be challenging for people who do not know at least one sign language to become fluent in IS.

- **Where is IS seen?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

There are several ways of seeing IS. It can be seen at international events where deaf people congregate, such as international, regional or transnational gatherings (i.e. WFD conferences and congresses, ICSD events and others). It can also be seen on social media such as Facebook or Twitter, on individual pages, which have examples of deaf people signing.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Perspectives-on-the-Concept-and-Definition-of-IS\\_Mesch-FINAL.pdf](http://wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Perspectives-on-the-Concept-and-Definition-of-IS_Mesch-FINAL.pdf)

- **What is involved in IS training?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

It is recommended that IS training covers both some of the theoretical background and some practical exercises using actual video footage of deaf people using IS. It may even be possible to invite deaf people from other countries to join online training sessions.

- **Who teaches IS?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

IS should be taught by a person who has a great deal of experience meeting deaf people from different sign language backgrounds. It is not recommended that a hearing sign language interpreter or a hearing sign language teacher provides this course but that this course be provided by a deaf person with a strong background in interpreting at, or through participation in international events.

- **What qualifications and experience should the teachers have to teach IS**  
[Click here for International Sign](#)

There are no qualifications for teaching IS. Some academic courses offer an introduction to IS, a few interpreter training programmes also include interpreting in IS and there are also some community-level courses as well. None of these courses accredits or qualifies a person to teach or interpret IS.

- **Statement about how WFD and WASLI encourage the learning and teaching of local sign languages** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The WFD strongly endorses the learning and teaching of local sign languages and does not support the unification<sup>6</sup> of sign languages. The WFD also believes that deaf children around the world have the right to learn sign languages. These positions are reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>7</sup>, ([Article 24 \(3\)](#)) and also strongly supported by WASLI – the use of IS should never replace a sign language.

- **What about an international lingua franca?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

In terms of spoken languages, English is considered a lingua franca. It is used in settings where the native languages of the two speakers are not the same. With respect to sign languages, it may be possible for deaf people to use a form of IS. However, because of international development efforts or movement of deaf people to and from some countries (such as the USA), languages such as ASL or BSL to a lesser extent may be seen as a lingua franca in terms of signed languages.

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### **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 122 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](http://www.wfdeaf.org)) Email: [info@wfd.fi](mailto: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 43 national interpreter associations. 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. (<https://wasli.org/>) Email: [secretary.wasli@gmail.com](mailto:secretary.wasli@gmail.com)*

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<sup>6</sup><https://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/statement-on-the-unification-of-sign-languages-january-2007/>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

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