

Framing South African Sign Language interpreting: Pictorial representations of SASL interpreters from 1994 to 2019

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Researchers have come to realise that, in contrast to the narratives underpinning professional codes of ethics, interpreters and translators are intimately involved in the events they are assigned to interpret or translate. They are not simply invisible facilitators working in that space 'in-between' cultures, untouched by events (cf. Tymoczko, 2003; Katan & Straniero-Sergio, 2003; Koskinen, 2008/2011; Wallmach, 2014). Since South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, Deaf people have played an increasingly important role in South African society, from politics, linguistics and literature to the entertainment industry and the academic fraternity. Interpreters have facilitated this access but have largely remained invisible and their roles undocumented.

As cultural historians recognize, archives are not neutral repositories, but provide a particular framing of the past (Footitt, 2014). The status of photographs as material sources for the writing of history has meant that their analysis has moved from the periphery of analysis to centre-stage, with cultural historians challenging the notion that a photograph can provide unmediated 'eye access to the real world of years ago' (Thomas, 2009: 156). This 'visual turn' invites researchers to ask different questions of visual media and to explore their role in informing how we understand the events and institutional contexts they depict and the historically specific forms of knowledge that they embody (Gorrara, 2016: 304). This paper will focus on a broad cross-section of photographic and other visual representations of South African Sign Language interpreters of various kinds – from those designated as 'non-professional' (child interpreters, community interpreters, and to an extent educational interpreters) to those operating in high-level professional contexts (parliamentary, media and conference interpreting) as a way of offering special insights into the history of the interpreter figure and the place of the interpreter in the history of the South African Deaf community. As a relatively new profession, signed language interpreting in South Africa has had to continuously evolve to meet the needs of members of the Deaf community as they strive towards formal language recognition on various platforms. This has meant that the boundaries between facilitating communication and being regarded as an ally of the Deaf community have become blurred at times. This pictorial review tracks the journey of South African Sign Language interpreter development since the dawn of democracy through the lens of the camera.

List of sources

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