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## Deaf and refugee – a different situation

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### Abstract

*This article elaborates on the subject; Deaf and refugee - a different situation, and is based on theoretical- and empirical material collected for the master thesis Mediated Interaction. The thesis' data was collected by focus group interviews, answering following research question: What do interpreters do when they interpret between deaf and hearing people? - with emphasis on deaf immigrants. In this article, information about Deaf People and Sign Language is used as a backdrop, to describe the situation for deaf refugees in Norway. The focus is on access to communication, and how elements such as trust, cultural differences and continuous language barriers influence interpreted situations and deaf refugees' inclusion into society. Findings show that language is the key to autonomy in a new land. In this process, the national Deaf Community plays an important role for deaf refugees. In addition, both hearing- and deaf interpreters reduce language barriers. In this process, they need flexibility when facilitating communication between hearing- and deaf interlocutors.*

**Keywords:** migration; deaf; sign language; communication; refugees.

### Introduction

People across the globe migrate for various reasons. Some leave their homes due to poverty or war, to live in peace and safety. Today, an unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from their homes, and this number is increasing daily. Among these migrants, nearly 22.5 million are refugees coming from war zones and developing countries like South Sudan, Syria and Afghanistan (UN, 2018). In 2017, it was estimated that 217,241 refugees were living in Norway, and this figure represents about 20 % of all migrants coming to the country (Statistics Norway, 2017).

### Deaf people

Norway is a small country. The total population is 5 million inhabitants, and of these about 5000 persons are deaf. Deaf people as a group is not easily measured. Membership in *The Deaf Community* is not solely dependent of hearing loss, and the extended Deaf Community consists of hearing persons with connection to deaf people and Sign Language (Haualand 2002, p. 1). In this view, The Deaf Community has about 16,500 members (Deafnet, 2016). The core of the community consists of deaf persons who identify as a cultural and linguistic minority. This group claims that measurements and degree of deafness, is not important when seeing deaf

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people as a minority, based on common cultural features and Sign Language (Saltnes, 2003, p. 5; WFD, 2016).

A medical approach, will on the contrary, define deafness as hearing loss of 80-100 decibel (dB), compared to normal hearing at 0-20 dB (WHO, 2018). In that light, deafness is a disability compared to other person's normal hearing. This perspective contributes to a marginalization of the group. The category *disabled* have not been well received amongst the majority of deaf persons in Norway, and The Deaf Community has revolted against the label (Breivik, 2000, p. 89). This categorization does also largely apply in developing countries, where it can be extremely difficult for deaf people to get any means to earn a living, or contribute to their community. Deaf people here face a lifetime of economic hardship and stigma, precluding the chance to fulfil their potential (Haualand, 2002, p. 58).

### **Deaf migrants**

Numbers from The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) shows that there are over 70 million deaf people in the world today (WFD, 2016). How many of these who migrate to Norway is not easily measured. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration<sup>1</sup> do not keep migrants' health information registered, and it is difficult to give an exact estimate of how many of the migrants are profoundly deaf upon arrival. Our neighbouring country Sweden, reports that approximately 20 % of the migrants have hearing loss when arriving. It is natural to assume that the scope from Sweden is somewhat the same in Norway (Kvitvær, 2016, p. 20). Statistics from Norway regarding children, reports that about 19 % of all children with hearing impairment between the ages of 0-18, are of non-western origin (Health Directorate, 2013, p. 7). Statistics also show that hearing loss occurs more frequently amongst people from non-western countries, compared to the general Norwegian population (Health Directorate, 2013, p. 24). There are many reasons for hearing loss amongst people in developing countries. One common reason is e.g. inter-marriage in groups from the Middle East, North Africa and South-Asia. Another reason for deafness is poor health services in the countries the migrants come from. Lack of general medical follow-ups and surgery, are usual causes to reduced hearing (Health Directorate, 2013, p. 10-11). In addition, can some ear diseases if left untreated, lead to hearing loss (Pritchard & Zahl, 2013). Otitis is one example of this, Rubella, Measles, and Mumps, others (Norwegian Health Informatics, 2017). Each severe in character, these diseases are part of a free of charge vaccine programme for children in Norway. This reduces the number of children who get infected (Health Norway, 2016). Technology and surgery like Cochlear Implants<sup>2</sup> (CI), do also reduce profound deafness. In Norway, all babies undergo a screening as infants, to detect any potential hearing loss. From 2004 onward, all children that would benefit using CI are offered the operation, and babies from nine months of age will undergo this surgery (Statped, 2014, p. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian title: *Utlendingsdirektoratet*

<sup>2</sup> A cochlear implant is an electronic medical device that replaces the function of the damaged inner ear. The implant provides sound signals to the brain, through electrodes, operated in to the ear (Winther, 2014). Retrieved from: <https://sml.sn.no/cochlea-implantat>.



Measures like vaccine programmes and surgery can be expensive, and are consequently not automatically offered to people in e.g. poor developing countries.

When arriving in Norway, a part of being included in the Norwegian society, involves contact with the hearing majority in formal and private settings. Migrants, who apply for permanent stay or Norwegian citizenship, must participate in an introductory training program. The program focuses on Norwegian language and social knowledge (The Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2017). From 2004, taking part in the program has been both a statutory right, and obligation for e.g. refugees and persons granted humanitarian status, in the ages between 18 and 55. The refugees receive financial support whilst participating in the program (Kompetanse Norge, 2016a). The participants get 600 hours of training in Norwegian Language and social studies, over a period of three years (Kompetanse Norge, 2016b).

The subject 'social knowledge' aims to describe and explain typical features in the Norwegian society, and the education is to be given in a language the refugee understands (Kompetanse Norge, 2016b). The language training results e.g. in a test in spoken Norwegian. For deaf refugees this test is in Norwegian Sign Language (hereafter 'NTS', *norsk tegnspråk*). In addition, the participants are tested in reading and writing Norwegian (Skills Norway, 2016). Hearing refugees will get this training and teaching aids in their native language, but this is not available for deaf refugees. Deaf refugees can be illiterate upon arrival, and this increases communication- and education barriers. If the deaf refugees are familiar with their national Sign Language, it is still difficult to find teachers with competence in that language. Further, there is lack of Sign Language teaching aids. The deaf refugees therefore get this training in NTS, a language they are in the process of learning (Statped, n.d).

Deaf migrants are in general, like other migrants, highly heterogeneous. Some are immigrants; others are asylum seekers, or refugees. They come to Norway from different countries, with different social structures. They have different life experiences, and different knowledge of language. Some are well educated others are not. The only thing they have in common is coming to Norway and relying on visual communication when interacting with others (Kvitvær, 2016, p. 20). This article will focus on the latter group, and the deaf refugees described here, all have minimal language skills in spoken, written- as well as Sign Languages.

The opportunity to meet other deaf persons and the Norwegian Deaf Community is important for the deaf refugees inclusion into society. The Deaf Community plays an important part both when the refugees re-establish their identity in the new country, and in the process of learning NTS. Since deaf people are more visually than auditory oriented, and a minority within the hearing majority, they often experience a mutual resemblance and likeness when meeting each other. This happens even though both culture and background can be very different (Haualand, 2006, p. 25-26). In this way, the world's Deaf Communities are transnational communities (Breivik, 2007, p. 15-16). In this lies that the members



often strongly identify with other deaf persons, independent of nationality (Haualand, 2006, p. 25).

Deaf refugees' inclusion into the local Deaf Community does, however, not happen automatically. Some communication barriers between the deaf Norwegians and the deaf refugees will be present, as communication across geographical borders is not easy. Ladd (2010, p. 61) describes the situation in England and the USA. He argues that deaf refugees' relationship with the local Deaf Community can be problematic. Deaf refugees can feel excluded and discriminated against within The Deaf Community. In the USA, there are examples of minorities in the national Deaf Community establishing their own networks and organizations, based on common origin. Norwegian research also reveal that deaf refugees can feel isolated, and want more contact with the Norwegian Deaf Community (Kristoffersen & Storhaug 1995, p. 130-131).

During the recent years, The Norwegian Deaf Community has made extra effort to include deaf refugees. This happens through projects and groups like «Multicultural Committees<sup>3</sup>», in the local deaf organisations (Oslo Deaf Association, 2016; Bergen Deaf Center, 2016), and organized social gatherings and activities (Bergen Deaf Center, 2015; Oslo Deaf Association, 2015). The Deaf Association in Oslo has completed a project called; «Better living conditions for deaf immigrants<sup>4</sup>». The project aimed to explore needs, challenges and how deaf immigrants in the county of Oslo and Akershus, could achieve better living conditions. The project recommends creating a position as «Consultant for Immigrants<sup>5</sup>», located in Oslo (Castello, 2015). Other initiators use social media as platform, and a support group called «Deaf Refugees Welcome to Norway», has been established on Facebook. This group aims to coordinate people who know NTS, and have them meet deaf refugees shortly upon arrival (Deaf Refugees Welcome to Norway, 2015). The deaf refugees also have access to the national Deaf Community in other arenas. If the deaf refugee is a child or a parent, Statped<sup>6</sup> and Aal Folk High School<sup>7</sup>, collaborate to offer training in NTS and lectures about different subjects for the family (Statped, 2016).

Learning a new language is a time-consuming process. Research shows that it takes five to seven years for people with a foreign language, to be academically fluent in a new language, and to fully participate in classrooms (Cole 1998, referred in Pritchard & Zahl, 2013). This means that the refugees will interact with Norwegian people, hearing and deaf, all before they learn NTS. Consequently, the communication struggles are noticeable in these situations (Olsen, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Norwegian title: *Flerkulturelt utvalg*

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian title: *Bedre vilkår for døve innvandrere*

<sup>5</sup> Norwegian title: *Innvandrerkonsulent*

<sup>6</sup> Statped is a national service for special needs education, and offer part-time courses for deaf persons and their network (Statped, 2016). For more information, see [www.statped.no](http://www.statped.no).

<sup>7</sup> Aal folk high school and center for the deaf (Ål folkehøgskole og kurscenter for døve) is a national one-year boarding school, and an education center offering training in e.g. Sign Language and Deaf Studies (Aal Folk High School, 2017). For more information, see [www.al.fhs.no](http://www.al.fhs.no).



## Sign Language

There are around 200 countries in the world, and between 6000 and 7000 languages (Uri, 2008, p. 13). We assume that there are deaf people living in most countries. Without hearing, deaf people cannot hear the voices of others. Hearing is also essential when it comes to controlling the speech organ, and is important for learning speech (Health Directorate, 2013). This means that voice volume and articulation, can be difficult to regulate when not hearing your own voice (Malmquist & Mosand, 1996, p. 28). The lack of control can cause discomfort, and make deaf people refrain from using their voice in communication. The opposite; lip reading, involves understanding what people are saying through mouth movements without sound. This is a highly uncertain communication form, which requires both skills, and good knowledge of the oral language to control. Mastering the oral part of interaction, may therefore potentially always be distant for deaf people. Communication barriers for deaf refugees are in this area permanent. Sign Language, on the other hand, is both safer and more expedient in communication for the deaf, since it is perceived through eyesight, a sense deaf people have intact (Peterson, 2006, p. 72-73).

Signed languages are often described as visual and gestural languages. This means that the languages are based on hand, arm, head and face movements. Mimicry is a part of the languages grammar, and it is possible to some extent carry the languages out as a mime. The Sign Language speaker moves body muscles and the language function without sound. Thus, is hearing not essential when producing or perceiving the language. Like spoken languages, signed languages have set linguistic systems with grammatical levels like phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics (Vonen, 2006, p. 127-130).

Every language, spoken or signed, is culturally based. Signed languages are like other languages developed naturally within cultural and social contexts (Amundsen, 2004, p. 145). There are no indications that the world's signed languages are related to each other (Vonen, 2006, p. 145). Despite the common myth that signed languages are international, and that all deaf people across the globe speak the same language, research shows that the languages are local like spoken languages (Amundsen, 2004, p. 145). NTS is one of the visual and gestural languages in the world (Schröder, 2006, p. 81), American Sign Language (ASL) is another. This language is the primary language of many deaf or hard-of-hearing North Americans (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2017). The language holds the same position as English has for hearing persons, and is widespread among deaf people. ASL also has great international influence, and Gallaudet University<sup>8</sup> has a unique position as a leading institution on research and studies. The university has deaf students from all over the world, and this contributes to ASL's prevalence across the globe (Haualand 2006, p. 28). In addition, will developing countries usually come in contact with Gallaudet

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<sup>8</sup> Gallaudet University, is in Washington D.C. It is the world's only university in which all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students. Retrieved from: <https://www.gallaudet.edu/about/news-and-media/fast-facts>



University in the early stages of developing a national Sign Language. These countries often adapt parts of ASL into their new language (Suppala, 2007, p. 17-20).

### **Theory and the study: Participants, Method and Data**

To elaborate further on the topic of this article I will use theoretical- and empirical material collected for the master thesis “Mediated Interaction”.

A review of national- and international research shows that the topic of this article is not fully explored, and has been left little attention in academic research studies. Some of the literature used in this article have focus on deaf migrants and their life. This research is a supplement to my research, and will be presented in this paragraph.

Kristoffersen and Storhaug’s study «Refugee and hearing impaired in Norway<sup>9</sup>» is from 1995. The study has a qualitative approach, based on interviews with hearing impaired refugees and their teachers at an *adult training program*<sup>10</sup>. The study explores how the refugees experience their new life in Norway: life in exile, the learning situation, social affiliation with others and work possibilities. The research shows that successful language acquisition, is essential for inclusion into society. Results also shows that life in a new country, can be characterized by isolation. The refugees experience multiple challenges dealing with communication barriers, language acquisition, lack of affiliation with others and exclusion from potential social fellowships.

The report «Deaf People and Human Rights» (Haualand & Allen, 2009), explores deaf persons’ life in developing countries. The report is based on a survey amongst deaf people in 93 countries, most of which are developing countries. The report contains information about the human rights situation of deaf people, addressing areas as recognition of Sign Languages, accessibility, deaf education and qualification of Sign Language interpreters (hereafter *interpreters*). Findings show that relatively few countries deny deaf people access to education, government services or equal citizenship based on deafness alone. Still, there exist several aspects, which deprive deaf people of access to large sections of society. Some of these aspects are; lack of recognition of Sign Language, lack of bilingual education, limited availability of Sign Language interpreting services, and widespread lack of awareness and knowledge about the situation of deaf people. Thus, many deaf people are not able to truly enjoy even basic human rights.

The Norwegian Health Directorate (2013), has developed a report with a quantitative survey methodology, mapping frequency of persons whose hearing is impaired. The focus is persons in the age range 0-18 years, amongst migrants in Norway with a non-western background. The mapping is done through electronic questionnaires, sent to child health clinics, hospitals with hearing wards and Statped. The mapping concludes that the number of immigrant children with hearing impairment, is higher amongst non-western immigrants, compared to the

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<sup>9</sup> Norwegian title: *Flyktning og hørselshemmet i Norge*

<sup>10</sup> Norwegian title: *Voksenopplæringen*



rest of the population. These children live somewhat spread throughout the country, but most of them are located close to Oslo, the capital of Norway.

### **The study**

This article will in addition, present empirical data from the master thesis “Mediated Interaction”. The master thesis focuses on creating meaning when interpreting, and aims to answer the following research question:

What do interpreters do when they interpret between deaf and hearing people?

- *with emphasis on deaf immigrants.*

### **Research design**

The thesis’s research design has a qualitative approach, with focus group interviews of hearing Norwegian interpreters. This research design is suitable when enlightening groups practices, and practitioners understanding of own practice (Halkier, 2010, p. 130). The participants were chosen by strategical selection (Grønmo, 2004, p. 88). Ten potential participants were invited by e-mail, and invitations with information about the project was sent to different interpreters. The interpreters were chosen based on my knowledge about the individuals. It was interesting to interview interpreters with somewhat long-term work experience, and knowledge about the subjects raised in the focus groups. In total seven interpreters participated in two focus groups, on two different occasions. When accepting the invitation, more detailed information was sent out. Included in this information was an interview guide, with questions and key words that would be debated in the focus groups (cf. Halkier, 2010, p. 47). The main subject for the first focus group, was interpreting between deaf and hearing people in general, debating obstacles and possibilities for communication across language barriers. When analysing the transcript from this focus group, interpreting for deaf immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees emerged as a subject frequently mentioned as an extraordinary challenge. The participants were therefore invited back to another focus group interview, to discuss this topic further. This focus group was arranged the same way as the first. A pre-planned interview guide was set up and sent out in advance, with open questions about challenges and possibilities the interpreters face when interpreting for deaf people not from Norway.

### **Analysis**

All utterances made by me and the participants, was recorded for transcription and analysis (cf. Halkier, 2010, p. 83). After transcription, a total of 250 pages of text was analysed. The recordings from both focus groups, was transcribed and analysed in the same way. When analysing the transcript, the text was reduced and categorized. In the process of categorizing the smaller parts of the data, other larger subjects frequently mentioned by the participants emerged. The Hermeneutical circle was used as a tool to see the smaller parts as important parts of a larger whole (Gilje & Grimen, 1993, p. 151-158). The smaller parts of the material were re-organized in categories based on content, and utterances with



similar content was put in categories. These categories dealt with both the interpreters' role performance and the process of interpreting between languages. The categories were titled: «communication tool», «cooperation», «role execution» and «culture». In combination with relevant literature, the content of these categories formed the basis for the thesis' empirical chapters, and are consequently a substantial part of this article.

### **Communication barriers**

The position of NTS has evolved tremendously over the last decade. The language has developed from a suppressed language, forbidden to use in communication amongst the Deaf (cf. Schröder, 2008, p. 32), to be recognised as an official language as of 2008. Through this increased status, NTS will be implemented in an upcoming Language Act, as one of Norway's minority languages (White Paper, Report to the Storting. No. 35 (2007–2008) 2008, p. 41). Sign Languages in many other countries, have not followed this development. Deaf persons and Sign Languages are repressed many places around the world, and Sign Language is often not permitted in education (Haualand & Allen, 2009, p. 6-10). Numbers from WFD also shows that 80 % of the world's 70 million deaf people, do not receive basic education in developing countries and are mainly illiterate (World Federation of the Deaf, 2016). Language deprivation during education and childhood, and Sign Languages' position in the refugees' home country, will influence whether the refugees are used to communication through standardized languages, or not.

Although the worlds Sign Languages are different from each other, they have one common denominator in that they are visual. This makes communication possible, even though the deaf refugees do not know a standardized Sign Language. Sign Languages' modality, spatiality and iconicity, opens for communication across geographical borders. The languages can undergo instant and temporary modifications, and be adjusted in ways spoken languages cannot. The adjustments will be customized to each conversation and setting, in which they are used (Hiddinga & Crasborn, 2011, p. 492-494; Haualand, 2008, p. 17). This communication across language borders, is not an *International Sign Language*, but a modified communication method often called *International Signs*. Suppala (2007, p. 15-20) makes the distinction between spontaneous international Signs, and more set methods, used by WFD members in gatherings such as Congresses and General Assemblies. Both can be defined as a «contact language», originating from the diversity in national Sign Languages. The international signs addressed in this article, are related to a description in Breivik (2007, p. 10), where they are described as a communication method, highly flexible and open to compromise. The communication method consists of iconic signs, gestures, the grammar of space and elements from national Sign Languages.

In situations where interpreters and deaf refugees communicate, before the refugees learn NTS, it is functional to use this sort of modified communication method in interaction. My findings show that the communication method is like international signs, and is not a standardized or national language. The nature of





the modification will vary from person to person, customized for each situation. Visual elements from NTS, iconic signs, mime, mimicry, signs the deaf refugees know from different national Sign Languages, international signs and the refugees «homemade» signs are used (Olsen, 2015, p. 4). The main goal with blending elements from Sign Languages and other visual elements, is to create meaning with the interlocutors, where proper linguistic translation is difficult. According to my findings (2015, p. 41-42), this is a somewhat uncertain form of communication, and works best when talking about concrete subjects, anchored in e.g. the physical context of the interaction. The method is less sufficient when talking about abstract- and hypothetical subjects.

Language in general is important for inclusion in society, and the ability to use language is described as an important tool in everyday life. Reduced access to language, will therefore be an obstacle for autonomy and independence (Kristoffersen & Storhaug, 1995, p. 37-38). *Sign Language Interpreting, and Recognition and use of Sign Language*, is listed as two of four basic factors tantamount to the protection of the human rights of deaf people (Hualand & Allen, 2009, p. 9; EU, 2016). Interpreters daily aim to secure the deaf persons freedom of speech. In this lies the right to receive information or ideas, and express own opinions (NOU, 2010:5, 2010). How do they work to secure this fundamental human right, despite of communication barriers?

### **Interaction through interpreters**

Refugees in Norway have right to interpreters. This right is laid down in several Norwegian laws e.g. Education Act, Courts Act and Immigration Act. If the refugee is deaf, The National Insurance Act, also gives right to interpreters. The last law, regards deafness as a disability, and defines the interpreter as a key person in the rehabilitation of people whose hearing is impaired (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2015a). The law thus gives deaf persons right to use an interpreter, leaving hearing interlocutors without the same statutory right. The Norwegian Interpreter Service, is responsible for administrating Sign Language interpreters in Norway. This institution is organized within The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration<sup>11</sup> (NAV), administrating The National Insurance Act, and deaf persons right to interpreters (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2015b). All interpreters are connected to NAV through employment, or other contract arrangements. The interpreters' affiliation with NAV, gives them the task to interpret for deaf refugees (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2015c).

For hearing refugees, the authorities will provide interpreters skilled in translating between Norwegian, and the refugees' native language. When the refugee is deaf, it is not adequate to use interpreters who translate between spoken languages. If the deaf refugee is fluent in their native Sign Language, it is still difficult to find an interpreter skilled in in interpreting between spoken Norwegian, and the refugees native Sign Language. For this, there are too many

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<sup>11</sup> Norwegian title: *Ny arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning*



different Sign Languages across the globe, and too few Sign Language Interpreters within each language. If the deaf refugees do not know any form of standardized Sign Language, the situation is even more complicated. Illiteracy also excludes written translation.

The responsible authorities anticipate that the interpreters' ability to sign, should bridge the gap which naturally exists in a communication situation needing an interpreter. Most interpreters in Norway, do not have NTS or other Sign Languages as their mother tongue, or first language (L1)<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, few of them are native Sign Language speakers, and they basically learn the language simultaneous with their interpreter training. In addition, their Bachelor Degree in Sign Language and interpreting, contains little specific training in interpreting for deaf refugees (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, n.d; Oslo Metropolitan University, 2018; The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, n.d).

This means that the interpreters do not necessarily understand foreign Sign Languages, nor produce signs understandable for the deaf refugee. Literature also states that interpreters do the best job when qualified, and fluent in the languages they are interpreting between (Lewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2014, p. 9). According to my findings (Olsen, 2015, p. 82), interpreters do not feel qualified to interpret in these settings, but see themselves as «*the only option the refugees have*». The deaf refugees have equal rights to interpreters, as any deaf person in Norway, but due to massive communication barriers and lack of qualified interpreters, they cannot fully benefit from using interpreters.

Before they learn Norwegian and NTS, communication with deaf refugees is based on visual cues, rather than what we would label a standardized Sign Language. This means that the refugees are left with relying on gestures, and visual signs when interacting. In situations where the interpreters and deaf refugees do not share languages, there are communication barriers between the interpreters and the refugees, in addition to communication barriers between the hearing and the deaf interlocutor. In other words; a complex situation. To be able to create meaning, the interpreters benefit from Sign Languages modality, and possibilities for modification (cf. Hiddinga & Crasborn, 2011).

The interpreters also use a variety of known interpreting strategies, where *flexibility* is of the essence (Olsen, 2015, p. 101). The concept *flexibility*, is related to Skaaden's (2013, p. 174-194) discussion about interpreters' use of *discretionary judgement*. Flexibility in the situations described in this article, highlight interpreters' focus on their primary task; to make people understand each other. To succeed, the interpreters «bend» ethical guidelines such as the principle of accuracy: «the interpreter shall interpret all content of what is being said, hold nothing back, add nothing, and change nothing» (Skaaden, 2013, p. 21, my

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<sup>12</sup> To illustrate; the department of Sign Language and Interpreting at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences has in total approximately 50 students in the BA program 2017/2018, of these only three students have deaf family members (Personal communication with staff, December 2017).



translation). At the same time is translation not undertaken ‘word by word’, and an interpreted version of an utterance can to a varying degree be like, or different from, the original utterance. This leaves the interpreters with some flexibility, and the interpreters e.g. actively use the context when they interpret. Sometimes they expand utterances, using more words or signs than originally spoken. Sometimes they reduce utterances, and the number of signs to highlight the essence of what is being said (Olsen, 2015, p. 38-39). An interpreted version should, however, not contain a different meaning than the original utterance (jf. Jareg & Pettersen, 2006, p. 28; Wadensjö, 1998, p. 50). The flexibility the interpreters need to create meaning between the interlocutors, gives them a dilemma; Straying too far from the original utterance, will make the interlocutors’ utterances not fully rendered, with all the consequences and misunderstandings that follow (Lomheim, 1999, p. 71-72). This means that communication barriers influence interpreted situations, in addition, other elements affect the situation, one being trust.

### **The known and unknown**

The presence of mutual trust is important to make interaction work (The Association of Sign Language Interpreters, 2015; Galal & Galal, 1999, p. 31; Jareg & Pettersen, 2006, p. 43; Solheim, 2012, p. 107; Skaaden, 2013, p. 106). In a new land, can both systems, traditions and culture be overwhelming. The refugees are in a difficult situation when they meet Norwegian authorities, and the situation can be characterized by suspicion. Many refugees have often experienced extreme life situations, and can due to previous experiences, mistrust institutions prepared to help, including the interpreters (Jareg & Pettersen, 2006, p. 43-44). Most interpreters in Norway are Norwegians, women, white and a part of the majority culture (Olsen, 2015, p. 25). The interpreters are in this way not someone the deaf refugees immediately identify with, or trust. Still, the interpreters work to establish trust with the interlocutors in these situations. Building trust can be a time-consuming process, and trust is most likely to occur in long lasting and stable relations (Gulbrandsen, 2000, p. 72).

For the interpreters, continuity is of the essence when building trust, and transcending from something *unknown* to something *known* and trustworthy. Continuity is, however, surprisingly difficult to implement in the interpreters’ professional life. NAV can be a helpful collaborator in these situations. The organisation aims to daily fulfil The National Insurance Act, giving deaf people access to interpreters whenever they book them. This can be a challenge, and NAV does not always manage to provide deaf consumers with interpreters.

In situations where NAV provides interpreters, it is still relevant to ask; has the «right interpreter» been provided? To fulfil this last aspect for deaf refugees, NAV must put quality above quantity. For efficiency, it may be tempting to think that any interpreter should be able to interpret for any given deaf person. Interpreting for deaf refugees, are on the contrary seldom situations suited for random use of interpreters. These situations require interpreters with ability to communicate visually and use unconventional forms of communication, not depending solely on NTS. Continuity in these situations, gives the deaf refugees opportunity to learn



how to understand and to be understood by the interpreter, and vice versa. This helps the process of developing *trust*, and securing the quality of the interpreters' interpreting (Olsen, 2015, p. 50-51). When gaining trust with the deaf refugee, other obstacles can occur, and a part of this involves cultural differences.

### **Cultural differences**

The Deaf Community, is often regarded as a cultural minority. Interpreters will through education and contact with this community, acquire knowledge about deaf people and deaf culture. They have, however, never been deaf themselves, and will never fully be a part of the Deaf Culture, nor completely understand life without sounds (Olsen, 2015, p. 68). For deaf refugees, it will be difficult to retrieve interpreters with similar cultural background as themselves, or profound understanding of their background. Despite this issue, the interpreters and deaf refugees, are able to establish communication within the same modality; using visual communication in interaction. This is of course an advantage, and allows interaction to happen, but it involves elements that also can be an obstacle. When interacting through visual communication without sound, eye contact is necessary, simply because it is impossible to perceive what is being said, without looking at each other (Vonen, 2006, p. 127-128). In some situations, it is difficult to establish the necessary eye contact between interpreter and deaf refugee (Olsen, 2015, p. 70).

This means that communication struggles occur, even before the linguistic interaction has started. There are of course various reasons to why people have difficulties holding eye contact, and some of these reasons can be culturally determined. Politeness is one. In some cultures, lowered glance and bowed head, is a signal of respect and humility (Gotaas, 2006, p. 251). It can also be a question about gender. According to Birch-Rasmussen (1998, p. 76), male deaf refugees are the ones to first learn their new country's national Sign Language, and they are the first to use interpreters. In Norway, there are few male interpreters. This means that male refugees often must relate to female interpreters, even though it can be problematic for them. The problem here lies in having eye contact with unfamiliar women, who are also for them, unconventionally dressed without e.g. covering their hair (Olsen, 2015 p. 69). For the interpreters to do their job, trust and eye contact is necessary. Another solution to secure communication between the interlocutors in these situations, is to bring in a deaf person as an interpreter (hereafter, *deaf interpreter*).

### **Deaf interpreters securing communication**

It may seem strange to use deaf interpreters to interpret for other deaf persons. One might wonder if the deaf interpreters would need hearing interpreters themselves? In situations where interaction does not involve solely spoken languages or auditory information, deaf interpreters can interpret for other deaf people. One example can be to interpret from written text to Sign Language, or from one Sign Language to another. Often do deaf interpreters collaborate with hearing interpreters, to get access to the spoken language. Interpreting for deaf

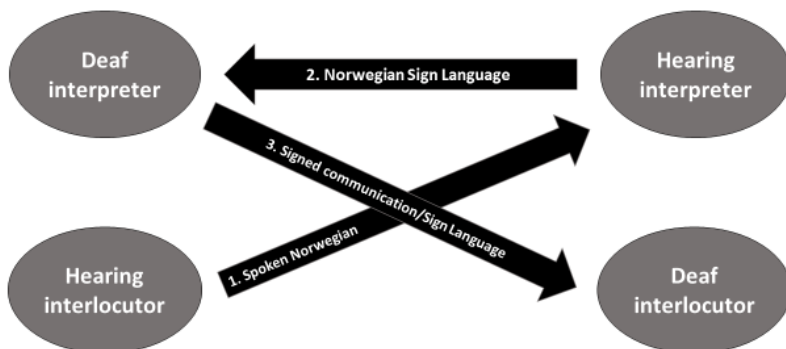


refugees is accentuated as one of the situations, where deaf and hearing interpreters team up (Bartley & Stone, 2008; Bauman, 2008; Boudreault, 2005; Stone, 2005).

Deaf interpreters as a phenomenon is nothing new. Deaf members of The Deaf Community, have been interpreting for many years in different situations, without having the title «professional interpreters» (Bauman, 2008; Stone, 2005). This situation is now about to change, and the interpreter training programs in Norway are open for deaf students to become professional interpreters (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, n.d; Oslo Metropolitan University, 2018; The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, n.d). The deaf refugees do not have the benefit of using deaf interpreters from the same cultural and linguistic background as themselves. Even though they do not share ethnic- or national background with the deaf interpreters, the individuals' mutual identity as deaf persons can enhance the feeling of «shared origin». In addition, will the Deaf Community's transnational features, and frequent contact across geographical borders, increase deaf persons' competence in communicating with each other, despite of not sharing national Sign Language (cf. Hauland, 2006, p. 25-27).

Cooperation between deaf and hearing interpreters, can materialize in different ways. Figure 1, displays a communication model of an interpreted situation, with both deaf and hearing interpreters. This is a small setting with two interlocutors. Interlocutors and interpreters are all present in the situation. They receive both verbal- and non-verbal communication from each other. Non-verbal communication is signals such as body language, expressed emotions and mimicry.

**Figure 1:** Model of communication situation with deaf and hearing interpreter



In Figure 1, the hearing interlocutor speaks Norwegian; the hearing interpreter interprets this to the deaf interpreter in NTS. The deaf interpreter translates the utterance into a modified communication method for the deaf refugee. Conversely, when the deaf refugee speaks, the deaf interpreter interprets this into NTS to the hearing interpreter - who interprets from NTS into spoken Norwegian



for the hearing interlocutor. The arrows in the figure, would then be opposite the current display, starting with the deaf interlocutor, ending at the hearing interlocutor when the deaf refugee replies (Forestal, 2011, p. 3).

Being a team of interpreters cooperating, is however not always possible. In some situations, it is simply not desirable with many persons present in the interaction, due to the nature of the conversation or physical limitations. In other situations, can the interpreted version be compromised, when the original utterance goes through two interpreters before reaching the recipient (Olsen, 2015, p. 46-47). At the same time, a native speaker's input in a challenging communication situation is beneficial for the hearing interpreters, and the interlocutors.

For hearing interpreters, deaf interpreters are an asset when it comes to both understanding what the deaf refugees are saying, and producing a communication method or Sign Language understandable for the deaf refugee. Most deaf interpreters have Sign Language as their L1. They are native speakers, with skills to produce a variety of solutions on how to express meaning visually (Olsen, 2015, p. 45). Forestal (2015) also describe these elements when focusing on deaf interpreters, interpreting between English and ASL:

*(...) follow the interactive rules of ASL, as well as the natural discourse flow, using rapport and cultural knowledge to guide the interaction. They use their inherent understanding of the cultural and linguistic needs of the Deaf consumer(s) to manage and mediate between participants and to coordinate the process as a whole. (Forestal, 2015).*

This competence is also called «Deaf Extra Linguistic Knowledge» (DELK), a concept introduced by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (Adam et al., 2014, p. 8). In this concept lies advantages deaf interpreters have in sharing life experiences with the deaf refugees, as members of the same minority within the hearing society. Using this competence, the deaf interpreters have good understanding of the refugees' situation as a whole, and can potentially use this to succeed at interpreting (Sheneman, 2016, p. 15).

### **Conclusion**

This article has elaborated on the subject; *Deaf and refugee – a different situation*. I have described the situation for deaf refugees, and some areas where their situation differs from other refugees'. I have focused on access to communication, and how elements such as trust, cultural differences and continuous language barriers influence interpreted situations, and deaf refugees' inclusion into society.

Sign Language is an important part of deaf refugees' ongoing process of inclusion. To overcome communication barriers, the authorities use the interpreters at hand, trained in interpreting between Norwegian and NTS. The use of interpreters in these situations is at some level logical, since the refugees interact through visual communication. The obstacle is that the interpreters do not



share language with the refugees, nor do they have training or competence to fully interpret within the communication methods required in these situations. This influences the deaf interlocutors' opportunity to express themselves, and to perceive what others are saying.

To improve the current situation, the responsible authorities need to initiate action, to secure deaf refugees' basic human rights in their new country. Here better-equipped interpreter services, and extended use of the Deaf Community's competence, are of the essence. The latter, plays an important role both as interpreters, as fellowship with *Deaf Extra Linguistic Knowledge*, and with their skills in communication across geographical borders.

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