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Translation Goes Virtual: Creating a Colombian Sign Language-Spanish Online Interpreting and Translation Undergraduate Degree

La traducción llega a la virtualidad: programa de interpretación y traducción Lengua de Señas Colombiana – español

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ABSTRACT: Building an online Colombian Sign Language (LSC)-Spanish interpreting and translation undergraduate program stems from a market dominated by associations that used inclusion regulations, Deaf community and LSC as framework to generate individual profits, but with little formal training in translation. The Deaf community mainly participates in three settings: academic, health, and legal, and they need interpreters/translators competent in the linguistic code and the mediation process, that use context-specific terminology and can characterize deaf users. To meet these needs, an online professional undergraduate program with three main components was conceived: translation and interpreting, linguistics, and Deaf culture with online educational methodologies and program management identified as the main challenges.

KEYWORDS: Translation; interpretation; online undergraduate program; Colombian Sign Language.

RESUMEN: La construcción de un programa de pregrado en interpretación y traducción Lengua de Señas Colombiana - español en modalidad virtual surge de un mercado dominado por asociaciones que usan las regulaciones para la inclusión, a la comunidad sorda y la Lengua de Señas Colombiana como marco para generar ganancias individuales, pero sin contar con entrenamiento formal en traducción. La comunidad sorda participa principalmente en tres contextos, el académico, el de salud y el legal, y requieren intérpretes y traductores competentes tanto en el uso del código lingüístico, como en el

proceso de mediación que utilicen terminología específica del contexto disciplinar, y que puedan realizar una caracterización del usuario sordo. Para suplir estas necesidades, se propone la creación de un programa profesional de pregrado, en modalidad virtual, con tres componentes principales: traducción e interpretación, lingüística y cultura sorda, que ha tenido retos como la implementación de metodologías educativas virtuales y la gestión.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Traducción; Interpretación; programa de virtual de pregrado; Lengua de Señas Colombiana.

1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL COMPONENT OF AN LSC-SPANISH INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION PROGRAM

According to data from the Colombian Health Minister (2013), the country's deaf population represents around 17,36 of the total amounts of people with disabilities. From these, around 42,3 % are currently at their productive stage (between 15 and 59 years old) and 71 % lives in urban areas, but in poorer conditions. Most of them do not live alone or require other people's help, evidencing the difficult life conditions that, paired with socioeconomic hardships and weak income potential reflects on the ability to have an autonomous life placing them in a vulnerable state (Instituto Nacional para Sordos 2014). The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on December 13, 2006 (Organización de las Naciones Unidas 2006). In Colombia, this Convention was approved in July 2009 and, subsequently, its ratification process ended in May 2011. Under this panorama, the country joined the 99 states that committed to taking concrete actions to ensure equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities establishing forms of human or animal assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2011). For the Colombian case, the interpretation of LSC is not only the result of the implementation of a particular education model, but an agency of co-construction of specific social processes and relationships. In the country, the development of sign language is linked to the history of interpretation of the LSC. Currently, LSC-Spanish Interpretation and Translation is offered as a service, particularly in the educational field, under the contracting of linguistic models and LS interpreters. However, there is currently no clear division for «language models» and «interpreters» positions, which makes direct hiring options difficult. For this reason, the emergence of foundations, cooperatives and associations that see personnel for educational inclusion as a self-sustaining business increased, making sign language become a «profitable business» at an individual or institutional level (Barreto Muñoz 2015). However, in Colombia, there is a shortage of programs that professionally train the people who provide assistance to deaf sign language users, and that's where a proposal of a professional undergraduate Colombian Sign Language (LSC)-Spanish program arises.

1.1. *Status of the Educational Offer*

Teaching interpretation and translation in sign language reflects the history of appropriation of the inclusion processes of the deaf community in society. Although a linguistic mediator can arise from programs focused on the training of graduates or from programs that accompany the deaf population, several universities in the world have focused on designing and offering programs specifically aimed at the training of interpreters at different levels: education non-formal, formal technological, professional and postgraduate education. In general, the types of training found highlight education in mixed formats, as well as distance education, online education combined with traditional face-to-face classes, and in some cases, education in virtual mode. Also highlighted are programs that include two-year diplomas, three- or four-year bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and vocational programs and that have part-time or full-time modalities, and may require prior knowledge of sign language and having graduated from a sign language study program, before allowing enrollment, although there are also programs that accept students who start from scratch, without prior knowledge of sign language, according to the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (2013).

1.2. *Academic Tendencies*

In line with the processes of incorporation of the Deaf population into daily life, specific legal frameworks and scientific and academic processes that study deafness, community participation around the deaf person, the development of sign language and its own evolution. of its speakers emerge. The establishment of these linguistic communities brings the need to formalize the instruction and study processes (specifically in the case of those who have served as linguistic mediators) giving way to the creation of professional careers in sign language interpretation, which seek specialized linguistic mediation by providing a strong knowledge base of codes, transmission modalities, systematic and structural knowledge of communities and their individuals, and professional projections that arise in this context. The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) proposes a series of guidelines for the training of sign language interpreters specifically aimed at countries where there is no official training in this field. The recommendations are based on the experiences of countries with greater experience in the subject and that have achieved formalization at the higher education level. In fact, Colombia is mentioned as one of the examples of developing countries that have incorporated the formalization of the training of sign language interpreters worldwide: interpreters and organizations of the deaf community have collaborated with several non-governmental organizations. governments to offer training to the country's interpreters (2013).

There are many models for Sign Language Study programs that provide the foundation for interpreters. However, general trends recommend building programs with three major components a linguistic component aimed at creating students' metalinguistic awareness and their effective management of monolingual and bilingual (translating) tasks; an interpretation component that ensures interpreters have a solid foundation in

translation, consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation skills, and that they can apply these skills to different texts and interactions; and a deaf Culture Component focused on developing the student's understanding of the real-life experiences, history, social status, and collectivism of deaf people, depending on the local and regional context.

Furthermore, WASLI (2013) emphasizes the need to take into account other areas to develop programs. Topics in these areas include deaf people as sign language or interpreting instructors, documentation of national sign language(s) and regional variants, and language recognition. Under this scenario, a professional interpreter must have training in these three major fields that become the basis for the development of professional skills.

2. PROPOSAL FOR AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE OF LSC-SPANISH INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS

The study of interpretation in Sign Language is a subdiscipline of translation and interpretation studies, located within descriptive translation studies. In its broadest definition, a sign interpreter facilitates communication between the deaf and the hearing, converting oral language to signed language and vice versa, delivering specific meanings within defined contexts. These professionals must have high skills in both languages (oral and signed) and must always strive for semantic rigidity and accuracy. This makes it necessary to establish professionalization of the sign language interpreter, to avoid interpretation misunderstandings, both in the source language and in the target language. Some studies by Barbosa Junior (2013, 335) even recommend coexistence with the deaf community, as it promotes linguistic immersion and perfects, or maintains, fluency in the acquired sign language. Following, a brief theoretical overview of the three components proposed by WASLI that underpin this proposal for training in LSC interpretation and translation in Colombia.

2.1. *Interpretation and Translation*

The notion of translation has varied over time, due to the social transformation of the language and the ways in which society communicates, therefore, concepts such as adaptation, version, transcreation (creative adaptation of video games or advertising), localization (linguistic or cultural adaptation of a text in a new cultural situation), etc. arise. From the first characterization of translation studies by Holmes (1975), a conceptual scheme is proposed that identifies and interrelates many of the things that can be done in translation studies, marking a future discipline and stimulating an approach that tends to establish formally said studies. Snell-Hornby (1995) proposes that, thanks to the growing popularity and the great international discussion generated, translation studies become an independent discipline. This initiative is supported by Baker (1998) who models the discipline of the 1990s, which seeks to unite academics from different, often more traditional, areas. This is reflected in the multidisciplinary sense that characterizes subsequent publications (Venuti 2008; *ibid* 2012; Gruesz 2004), which seek to preserve

the achievements of past decades with a view to inserting themselves into a more demanding future.

Interest in the study of interpretation in sign languages arose towards the end of the 90's a period characterized by an academic openness and an increase in interdisciplinarity. From the field of conference interpretation, parallels are established between the interpretation modalities used for oral languages and the particularities of the modalities used in sign language. In this way, sign language interpretation studies begin by exploring the particularities of this service (Metzger 1999) continue with aspects such as ethics (Anderson 2002; Llewellyn-Jones and Lee 2013) followed by studies where the quality of sign language interpreters from the perspective of deaf users (De Wit and Sluis 2012) to studies that focus on the analysis of the specific training that these interpreters must receive (Shaw and Hughes 2006).

2.2. *Colombian Sign Language*

Studies in the description, definition and characterization of Sign Language, as a language, with rules and normalization were proposed by Stokoe (1960) defining an analytical system through the structures of manual patterns. Stokoe's paradigmatic change, in the middle of the 20th century, affected the conception of the way of seeing the deaf community in three essential aspects: the educational change and the teaching of sign language; the acquisition of language from the perspective of the deaf, and finally the linguistic demonstration of a language for the deaf. This last process occurred within the framework of the change of focus in language studies, on the relationship between language, culture and society and the presentation of Chomsky's Syntactic Structures, which explained a generative grammar. Stokoe proposed a semantic phonology, aspects of the morphology and syntax of American Sign Language in which phonology [...] invites one to consider a sign (that is, a word of a primary sign language) as the simple union of a noun and a verb. In proper semantic terminology, a sign is an agent-verb construction. The agent is called that because it is what acts (in sign language as well as in generative grammar), and the verb is what the agent does, these verbs can be transitive and intransitive (Stokoe 1960, 125).

Since the 90s, a process of linguistic description and definition of Colombian Sign Language (CSL) has been generated, based on Stokoe's postulates. In principle, LS is not a mimic representation of oral language, nor homemade codes to communicate with the deaf, they are not artificial systems designed to help individuals with language problems and, «above all, they are not the unstructured signs that appear in the methodology called total communication, which consists of the use of all the means of communication available to help the deaf to communicate, also including prostheses to use the auditory remains, oral language, lip-facial reading, reading and writing of texts, etc» (Tovar 2004, 26). Colombian Sign Language studies go back to the theoretical works of (Baquero 1993) and the Teaching Manual of the National Federation of the Deaf of Colombia (Mejía 1993), these studies deal with the phonology of the LSC where the difficulties of the description, starting from the models of simultaneity and sequentially applied to articulation phenomena. Other works focus on analyzing the explanation of the

functioning of the segmental level, the description of manual configurations and spatial movements (Oviedo 2001). Also, the morphological, lexical and syntactic processes observed in the LSC are addressed. These works respond to the implication that Tovar (2004) raises about the need to carry out studies in Sign Language and is located within the framework of carrying out training and research processes, which legitimizes the importance of a program in Language Interpretation and Translation of Signs, with a linguistic base that responds to the challenges of studying this language.

2.3. *Deaf Culture*

Deaf Culture is defined as the set of values, rules of behavior, traditions and productions of a group of individuals characterized by a particular way of life in which they possess knowledge of their world and share experiences of what it means to be Deaf (Lane 1995; Mindess 2014; Rosen 2003). One of the most important characteristics in the studies of Deaf Culture is the change of perspective from people in a state of disability to people who are users of a visual-gestural linguistic code, with their own grammatical structure, often considered part of a linguistic community (Foster 1996).

In Colombia, studies persist from the point of view of people with disabilities and, although educational policy and regulations have been widely studied, these are limited to guidelines for primary and secondary basic education, with little emphasis on the needs of the deaf at the higher education level (Díaz Flórez 2003). However, there are efforts to explore the initiatives carried out in university institutions to demonstrate the knowledge and actions of academic and administrative entities in the university context of Colombia. For a higher education environment to be considered inclusive, it must carry out restructuring projects in different aspects (Molina Bejar 2010). Likewise, the study of the socio-familial context of the deaf student is important for its characterization, which is why there are explorations of the processes of knowledge construction specifically oriented to the socio-familial particularities of deaf subjects (Fontal González & Mejía Zuluaga 2015). Also, there are university experiences that welcome the deaf population and reflect on the process of inclusion of students at the higher education level, like the case of the National Pedagogical University, where efforts focused on the training of bilingual deaf graduates provide, with high quality, the education of the Colombian deaf community (Rodríguez de Salazar et al. 2008).

2.4. *Online Education*

Online education is an emerging modality in Colombia, which arises from distance education, to respond to those who, for economic or geographical reasons, did not have access to education. In 2002 Moodle was born as a response to the LMS (Learning Management System) and with it the conception of a virtual campus, a space in which various activities that make up the learning process through technological mediation are developed. Subsequently, virtual learning spaces were established as a scenario of opening to other languages on the Internet (Yong et al. 2017). The proposed program is based on educational action, which is understood as a dynamic process where content

converges through digital media, the social and cultural context, and the construction of knowledge through the interaction between teacher and students. Communication establishes the need for interaction through the channels established in the LMS, an aspect that must be supplied by classroom discourse and propose other types of languages that expand perception. As for technology, it is understood as the medium through which learning takes place, in this case the LMS, is constituted as a virtual learning environment (AVA) that houses virtual learning objects (OVA). All these elements promote forms of communication and acquisition of knowledge based on the student's autonomy.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The main challenges identified in the conception and construction of the online strategy are related to the didactics and management of the program (Giraldo 2006). Students undertake a two-module competence acquisition process with a basic cycle aimed at second language acquisition, and historic and theoretical knowledge about the translator's role according to the settings where they work; and a professional cycle aimed at exploring the techniques and operators of the translation process used in contexts where deaf people participate. These competences needed approaches that cover aspects such as exercises designed to reinforce conceptual knowledge, activities focused on the reinforcement of language skills in both Spanish and LSC, use of classroom projects and formative evaluation.

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