

WASLI Paris 2019: Truly, not just picnics in the gardens and strolling by the Seine

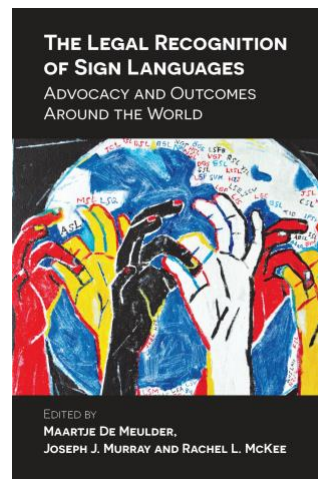
Rachel McKee

'Paris' and 'conference' is a tricky combination: the destination is so diverting - the food, the sights, the ambience. So much to appreciate, so hard to be confined in a conference venue! But some of us toughed out the challenge of dividing our attention to partake in the buzzy event that was WASLI Paris. It was the largest ever, at about 500 strong, with a sizeable contingent from Oceania: 11 from NZ, around 36 from Australia, 7 from Fiji. The food was very French: petit fours, lovely cheeses, and other elegant delicacies on offer at breaks. But we weren't there just for the food, and definitely not for the antiquated, uncomfortable auditorium seating installed mid-last century. The opening keynote took a 'memory lane' approach with Bill Moody (a pioneering international interpreter) and Lisa Kaupinnen (former long-serving WFD president) 'chatting' about key moments they recalled in the growth of interpreting as a worldwide profession, and interpreters' integral role in international deaf advocacy which led to WASLI and its partnership with WFD. I'm old enough to remember many of the developments and people they mentioned and I enjoyed it, but I'm not sure if this format had the same impact for many 'fresher' and global South delegates attending. Another presentation with historical perspective that drew a spirited response was Anna-Lena Nilsson's (Sweden/Norway) courageous (I thought) analysis of the rising prestige accorded to International Sign interpreting and interpreters at WFD events over the decades, at the expense of support for interpreters who work in their national sign language for a country delegation. A responder to this suggested that the policy of encouraging IS as the main conference language effectively divides deaf participants into first and second class language users, according to their familiarity with IS (and implicitly, English and other sign languages). Indeed, IS is attracting attention and research funding at the moment, with several European presentations at WASLI reporting on research into IS interpreting. Also critiquing policy and practice around interpreting, Deaf scholars Maartje De Meulder (Belgium)ⁱ and Hilde Haualand (Norway) presented on the idea that interpreters serve as 'bandaids on a wound', insofar as interpreting provision is the default institutional response to implementing 'access' or 'language rights' for deaf citizens, when other solutions may be preferable - such as services offered directly in SL ('concordant language services'). They didn't shy away from identifying widespread naïve belief about the degree of access that interpreting can achieve, and contending that the interpreting profession, by default, enables the mainstreaming ideology that has dismantled deaf schools and reduced direct experience of schooling in favour of mediated education. A tough conundrum to resolve at local and individual level! Another challenge they threw out for interpreters and service providers to chew on is the skewed distribution of interpreting resources towards the language-privileged (more bimodal-bilingual) segment of the deaf community who utilise more interpreting time, and whom interpreters tend to be more enthusiastic to work with than other types of deaf people. In sum they call for more critical scrutiny at policy level about how different kinds of 'access' might be implemented in different contexts, both with and without SLIs.

At a more 'micro' level, I enjoyed Emily Kauling's (Netherlands/ Edinburgh) presentation on her PhD research investigating, "How do participants in interpreted events in workplaces perceive the distribution of responsibility for professional discourse?" She identified features of 'in-group' workplace talk, and considered to what extent use of this discourse is

shared across deaf and hearing colleagues, and interpreters – and what the different parties believe is occurring as this kind of talk is interpreted. A nice term from this research was ‘fluff-fluff’ – as one deaf participant described interpreters using English vocab or phrasing that serves to ‘up’ the register or to match a hearing discourse style. (I noted an example of redundant fluff-fluff during the conference when a signer on stage said: “I want to thank the interpreters”, and the voice interpretation was: “I’d like to thank the interpreting service personnel”.) Kauling’s takeaway message was that an ‘interpreted event’ involves certain kinds of cooperation by all participants, although interpreters often consciously cooperate mainly with deaf parties, and deaf participants, on the other hand, may have little awareness or control over how much responsibility interpreters take for ‘cultural mediation’ of their contributions. These findings were exactly in line with Rosie Henley’s poster at WASLI that presented her study of how interpreters cooperate with deaf vs hearing chairpersons in meetings.

Translating written texts into SL was the focus of a very informative presentation by deaf linguist/translator Christian Rathmann (Germany), who unpacked the ‘cocktail of ingredients’ and various stages required to produce a translation that integrates DELK (deaf extra-linguistic knowledge) into a SL text which communicates effectively to a deaf audience. Rathmann’s presentation was timely as demand for translation into SL is increasing worldwide, but practice is often rather ad hoc, rather than based on knowledge of ideal translation processes. This is just my sampler of presentations that gave me food for thought and action, (along with a good sampling of exquisite pastries from the boulangeries along the way in the mornings, I’ll admit). Knowing that NZ won’t be responsible for making tea and sandwiches at the next WASLI conference, I encourage you to consider attending WASLI Seoul 2023, which is guaranteed to offer a differently flavoured slice of interpreting in the wider world. You won’t regret it.



ⁱ At WFD Paris, our jointly edited book was launched: