

Sign Language Interpreting in the Turkish Public Service Domains in the 21st Century¹

Türkiye’de 21. Yüzyılda Kamusal Alanlarda Sağlanan İşaret Dili Çevirmenliği Hizmetleri

Derleme/Review

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current state of sign language interpreting (SLI) services provided in the Turkish public service domains with reference to the studies that focus on the professionalization of public service interpreting. The paper first reviews the history and the current status of Turkish Sign Language (TİD) and Deaf education in Turkey to provide insight into the relevant social and linguistic context. Then, following an evaluation of the interpreting training and certification regimes, the in-person and video interpreting services offered in public service settings are explored. In addition, the private sector’s recent technology initiatives that aim to assist the Deaf and hard of hearing with their communication problems are addressed evidencing the increased awareness about SLI in the Turkish private sector. Lastly, an overview of the work and practices of the SLI associations is provided. In light of the general picture presented, the current status of SLI in Turkey is discussed with its perils and pitfalls. The paper concludes that SLI in Turkey can be regarded as a “semi-profession” (Bontempo, 2013) despite the advances made in recent years as a result of the government’s interpreting initiatives and the integration of web-based communication technologies to interpreting solutions available for the Deaf community. It is noted that not only interpreter training and certification regimes, but also Deaf education system require reforms to increase the accessibility to and the comprehensiveness of the SLI services in Turkey.

¹ This study is partially informed by my unpublished MA thesis titled “The Professionalization of Sign Language Interpreting in Turkey: Interpreter Training and Public Interpreting Services” which was submitted to The Institute for Graduate Studies in Social Sciences, Bogazici University on July 2017.

Key words: Turkish sign language, sign language interpreting, public service interpreting, video interpreting, professionalization.

ÖZET

Bu makale, toplum çevirmenliği hizmetlerinin profesyonelleşmesini ele alan çalışmalardan hareketle, Türkiye’de kamusal alanlarda sunulan işaret dili çevirmenliği hizmetlerinin mevcut durumunu incelemektedir. Okura mevcut toplumsal ve dilsel bağlamla ilgili öngörü kazandırmak amacıyla çalışma kapsamında öncelikle Türk İşaret Dilinin (TİD) ve Türkiye’deki Sağır eğitiminin tarihi ve güncel konumu gözden geçirilmektedir. Ardından, çevirmen eğitim ve sertifikalandırma uygulamalarının özet bir değerlendirmesi yapılmakta ve akabinde toplum çevirmenliği bağlamında yüz yüze ve video üzerinden gerçekleştirilen çeviri hizmetleri hakkında bilgi verilmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, Türk özel sektöründe işaret dili çevirmenliğine yönelik artan farkındalığa dikkat çekmek amacıyla, özel sektörün sağır ve işitme güçlüğü yaşayan bireylerin yaşadığı iletişim problemlerine yönelik geliştirdiği teknoloji girişimlerine değinilmektedir. Son olarak, ülkedeki işaret dili tercümanları derneklerinin çalışmalarıyla ilgili kısa bir bilgi verilmektedir. Çizilen bu genel çerçeve nezdinde, işaret dili çevirmenliğinin Türkiye’deki mevcut konumu artı ve eksileriyle tartışılmaktadır. Çalışma, son yıllarda hükümet tarafından gerçekleştirilen çeviri girişimleri ve Sağır topluma yönelik çeviri hizmetlerine web tabanlı iletişim teknolojilerinin entegrasyonuna rağmen, Türkiye’deki işaret dili çevirmenliğinin “yarı-meslekleşmiş” (Bontempo, 2013) bir konumda bulunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Türkiye’de işaret dili çevirisi hizmetlerinin erişilebilirliğinin ve kapsayıcılığının artırılması için sadece çevirmen eğitimi ve sertifikasyon uygulamalarında değil, ayrıca Sağır topluma yönelik eğitim sisteminde de reformlara ihtiyaç duyulduğu vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Türk İşaret Dili, işaret dili çevirmenliği, toplum çevirmenliği, video üzerinden çeviri, profesyonelleşme.

1. Introduction

According to Franz Pöchhacker (2010, p. 159), interpreting gradually became an established profession in the twentieth century following the foundation of international organizations during the post-war era, which led to the emergence of first interpreter training programs and the establishment of professional associations like AIIC (the International Association of Conference Interpreters) in 1953. It took more time for sign language interpreting to be considered a profession. Cynthia B. Roy and Jemina Napier (2015, p.1) stress that the 1960s and the 1970s witnessed significant advances for the status of sign languages and sign language interpreting. One important contribution in this regard came from academia with the emergence of the studies that approached sign languages as authentic languages, not just gesture systems. The pioneering publications in this regard belong to the Dutch linguist Tervoort (1953) and the American linguist Stokoe (1960) on the sign languages in Europe and the USA, respectively. It is crucial to note that these developments need to be considered within the social and historical context of the relevant period. With the beginning of the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s, new laws came into effect, and grants were made available to assist deaf people in many aspects of social life. This new status quo, in turn, led to a need for professional interpreters, triggering the establishment of

prestigious SLI associations such as the RID (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf), and the development of the first training programs, educational materials, and certification examinations (Roy & Napier, 2015, pp. 2-3). Napier (2011) underlines that in many countries the development of SLI followed the same progression as in the example of the US even though their journey towards professionalization started more recently. Nowadays, SLI occurs in diverse contexts and in both conference and community interpreting settings, “including public service domains such as education and health settings; private-sector contexts such as job interviews; and in social and cultural life, including theatrical productions and museum tours” (Leeson & Sheridan, 2019, p. 526).

In Turkey, following the Turkish government’s official recognition of Turkish Sign Language (TİD) in 2005, SLI has been gaining increasing public and private sector interest. In the following years, the government has taken a number of initiatives to provide interpreting services for the Deaf while the private sector has also contributed to the efforts that aim to increase the social welfare of the Deaf community. These SLI services, which constitute the primary focus of this article, mainly target public service domains such as health settings and education. Thus, the criteria and factors deemed necessary for the professionalization of public service interpreting within the literature on interpreting provides a basis for evaluating the current status of the SLI profession in Turkey for the purpose of this study.

2. Literature Review on the Professionalization of Public Service Interpreting

The professionalization of public service interpreting has been an integral part of the interpreting studies literature for more than two decades. One of the pioneering studies in this respect was Mikkelson’s 1996 publication where she listed the key factors necessary for professionalization in view of the four steps Tseng (1992) had previously laid down on occupational professionalization. According to Mikkelson (1996), community interpreters should first reach a common consensus regarding their role and function in society and inform their clients thereof. Mikkelson lists the establishment of interpreter training programs and professional associations that foster professional and ethical conduct by interpreters as the subsequent necessary steps. Similarly, Pöchhacker (1999) points out that the professionalization of community interpreting requires the co-existence of several constellations. Pöchhacker (1999, p. 131) lists these constellations as “legal provisions, institutional (and not least financial) arrangements of interpreting service delivery, a certification authority, a professional organization, a code of ethics and standards of practice, and university-level training”.

In another study, Ozolins (2000, 2010) proposes a “spectrum of response” to assess the status and extent of public service interpreting services in a given country. According to Ozolins, the need for public language services is initially neglected by the authorities. At a later stage, individual institutions develop their own solutions, mainly by using ad hoc interpreters. However, with the gradual increase in the need for interpreting, authorities introduce generic language services, such as telephone interpreting lines, which aim to provide “broader-based language services that make some attempt to cover public sector needs” (Ozolins, 2000, p. 23). However, the success

of generic language services depends on the adoption of a comprehensive approach. According to Ozolins (2000, p. 21), the provision of language services, training and accreditation are three essential factors for the development of a comprehensive approach. Ozolins (2000, 2010) also highlights the importance of providing training for users on how to work with interpreters and creating opportunities for professional development.

As the studies mentioned above suggest, the key factors necessary for ensuring accessible and comprehensive interpreting services in the public sector can be listed as (1) the state's dedication to the provision of interpreting services, (2) the necessary legal arrangements introduced for this purpose, (3) a (preferably university-level) training regime, (4) a certification system and (5) professional associations that lay down standards of professional conduct.

Evaluating the global status of SLI, Bontempo (2013) suggests that SLI is currently a "semi-profession". She links the semi-professional status of SLI to the absence of "uniformly applied standards of practice, years of requisite training with a significant intellectual component, or registration boards with legal authority" (Bontempo, 2013, p. 34). Bontempo (2013) also stresses that a number of traits Tseng (1992) suggested as markers of a profession – which also guided interpreting scholars such as Mikkelson in laying down the factors for the professionalization of community interpreting – do not apply to SLI universally. According to Napier (2011), the relatively slower emergence of the SLI as a profession compared to other branches of interpreting may be due to governments' failure to recognize the sign languages of their countries and different levels of significance attributed to welfare work with the Deaf. A brief review of different nations' approach to SLI and language rights of the Deaf supports Napier's reasoning. For example, as Anna Lena Nilsson (1997) states, Sweden was among the first states to recognize the rights of Deaf people and ethnic minorities to interpretation with a legislation issued in 1947. However, there are still many countries that lack legislation that regulates the language and interpreting rights of minority groups and local deaf populations. Comparing the situation in Turkey to the Swedish example, we see that it took more than 50 years for a similar legislation to come into effect in the Turkish context. Judging by the dramatic difference observed in the timing of public policies on sign languages and SLI, it does not come as a surprise that the level of professionalism in the planning and provision of interpreting services also varies widely.

In view of the literature presented above, the following chapters will first provide information regarding the history of TİD and deafness in Turkey and then discuss the advances made in SLI in Turkey since the official recognition of TİD in 2005.

3. The History and Current Status of TİD

The sign language used in Turkey is Türk İşaret Dili (Turkish Sign Language/TİD). Despite its late recognition by the Turkish Government as the language of the Turkish Deaf community, the use of a sign language (or sign languages) in Turkey dates back centuries. Based on the accounts of the European travelers that visited the Ottoman

empire, Miles (2000) claims that deaf servants were employed in Ottoman courts from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries, mainly due to concerns over confidentiality. Similarly, Pakalın (1983) and Özcan (1994) state that the employment of deaf servants by Ottoman sultans dates back to as early as the fourteenth century. Furthermore, according to Miles (2000, p. 128), a signing system with which users could communicate complex matters was already developed by the sixteenth century and hearing courtiers recognized its usefulness. The first Deaf school in Turkey was also founded during the Ottoman era in Istanbul, in 1889 (Tanyeri, 2016). Under the leadership of the founder Grati Efendi, an Austrian Merchant, the instructors also developed a sign alphabet by adopting the French sign alphabet to the Ottoman alphabet with minor changes so that they could teach their students using sign language (Günay & Görür, 2013). Even though this sign alphabet is no longer in use, Grati Efendi and his colleagues' work was influential for setting an example for future Deaf schools in the country. However, despite the archival records that indicate the use of a sign language in Turkey centuries ago, Zeshan (2003) argues it is not possible to estimate how old TİD is and whether it bears any connection to the historical sign language due to the insufficient documentation of the language in the Ottoman era. Also, researchers (Zeshan, 2003; Arık, 2016) agree that TİD does not bear the influence of another sign language while this is the case for some sign languages used worldwide.

There are conflicting reports regarding the number of Deaf and hard of hearing people in Turkey. According to the Turkish Disability Survey conducted in 2002, people with hearing impairment constitute 0.37% of the Turkish population, which corresponds to 287,500 people (İlkbaşıran, 2016). However, the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services' (Aile Çalışma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı/AÇSŞB) 2019 bulletin on the disabled and the elderly estimates this percentage as 1.1%, which increases the number of people with hearing impairment to 836,000 (AÇSPB Bulletin, 2019, p. 53). Based on the data of the Turkish Disability Survey, Kemaloğlu (2016, p. 63) estimates that the number of people that use TİD in Turkey should be between 84.000-180.000, a figure that corresponds to 0.13 % - 0.27% of the total population.

The level of TİD and Turkish proficiency among the Turkish Deaf community varies, mainly due to the oralist approach that was adopted in Deaf education by the Ministry of Education as of the 1950s (Zeshan 2003; Kemaloğlu & Kemaloğlu, 2012). Today, no Deaf school in Turkey uses TİD as the language of instruction and there is no educational institution that uses bilingual teaching methods which would incorporate Turkish and TİD in their curriculums (İlkbaşıran, 2013; Kemaloğlu, 2014; Kubuş, İlkbaşıran & Gilchrist, 2016), although a bilingual approach was followed by some private schools for the Deaf before the adoption of the oral-only education (Zeshan 2003, p. 45-46). Currently, deaf people are not employed at Deaf schools as teachers or teacher aides, which results in little interaction between schools and the adult Deaf community (Zeshan, 2003, p.45). Teachers serving at Deaf schools who are willing to learn TİD can only do so with the help of their students and/or by attending the TİD courses offered by public training centers and Deaf associations (Kemaloğlu & Kemaloğlu, 2012). This means that deaf children born into non-deaf families face a greater challenge in developing TİD skills. Also, it would not be realistic to expect

academic success from the majority of deaf students where there is no common language through which they can communicate with and learn from their teachers. Not surprisingly, the oralist approach results in poor academic success, and researchers (İlkbaşıran, 2016; Kubuş et. al., 2016) state that some students graduate from Deaf schools without acquiring reading and writing skills. The number of schools available for deaf children is another problem. According to İlkbaşıran (2013, p. 13), the current number of schools for the Deaf “accounts for only 10% of the presumed national deaf population of school-age”. The small number of deaf individuals who manage to be admitted to academic programs in later years of their lives also continue to face challenges, this time due to the absence of interpreting provided in educational settings (Kuş, İlkbaşıran & Gilchrist, 2016, p. 37).

Turkey signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2007. Following this development, the Turkish Higher Education Council has made two TİD courses obligatory in the curriculum of the academic programs in Deaf education. In addition, TİD courses have been included in the curriculums of various academic programs as electives. However, considering the inequalities and disadvantages deaf people suffer from in the educational setting, it is clear a broader educational reform starting with Deaf schools is necessary in Turkey. Finally, the problems deaf individuals experience in terms of access to education in TİD also creates a number of linguistic challenges for sign language interpreters as shall be discussed in the following sections.

4. Government-led Sign Language Interpreting Services in Turkey

According to the Code for the Disabled which was amended in 2005, members of the Turkish Deaf community can ask for interpreting in TİD when they require language assistance in public service settings. The amendment of the Code for the Disabled was followed by the promulgation of additional regulations concerning how interpreting services and training programs would be planned. Accordingly, the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services (Aile Çalışma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı/AÇSHB), would be responsible for providing interpreting services in TİD. For this purpose, each provincial directorate of the AÇSHB was asked to deploy a sign language interpreter to answer provincial interpreting needs. In addition, the Ministry of Education (MEB) was authorized to plan and organize training courses in TİD.

One significant initiative that resulted from the regulations issued after 2005 was the establishment of the Turkish Sign Language Approval and Scientific Board (Türk İşaret Dili Billim ve Onay Kurulu/TİDBO) for ensuring cooperation among government institutions and stakeholders. The TİDBO includes representatives of the AÇSHB, the Ministry of National Education (MEB), the Turkish Language Society (TDK), the Higher Education Board (YÖK), and the Confederation of the Deaf. The TİDBO Board had several responsibilities such as documenting TİD, preparing and disseminating educational materials in TİD, and certifying sign language interpreters.

4.1. Problems in Interpreter Training and Certification

The TİDBO administered two certification exams in 2007 and in 2013, respectively. The certified interpreters were to be appointed to the AÇSHB's 81 provincial offices country wide. While only 27 individuals were certified in the first exam, the number increased to 87 out of 930 applicants in the second one. However, Diriker (2015) notes that the certification exams were "carried out on an ad hoc basis" (p. 101) due to the vagueness of the assessment criteria. According to the then chief of the Turkish National Federation of the Deaf, one of the member institutions of the TİDBO back in the day, there were no assessment guidelines previously prepared for those assessing the exam performances. The examinees were expected to watch video recordings and interpret what they watched in Turkish into TİD and vice versa. They were also given official documents such as notary public proceedings and asked to provide on sight interpreting into TİD. The exam focused on measuring language skills per se and did not test other significant qualities such as participants' approach to interpreting ethics, knowledge of the Deaf culture, etc. Moreover, the measurement of the language skills was basically based on the personal judgment of the jurors who had not been informed about any criteria that should be observed (Conker, 2017). Despite the ad hoc nature of the examinations, the fact that they were administered by the TİDBO Board can still be regarded as a positive step for it consists of the representatives of several stakeholders who have different responsibilities for improving the access to the services provided in TİD.

Unfortunately, the TİDBO Board no longer administers certification exams. The authority to certify interpreters was given to the MEB (Ministry of National Education) in 2013 when it introduced the 200-hour sign language trainer and interpreter training (SLTIT) course module. This course is offered on a free of charge basis by Public Training Centers operating within the MEB. The attendees should previously complete a 120-hour TİD course to be eligible for this course module. However, judging from the course curriculum and my opinion of the classes that I have observed, the training does not go beyond learning basic terminology and interpreting simple sentences into TİD. Like Deaf schools, public training centers that offer TİD and interpreting courses also do not employ deaf instructors. Since the courses are not offered in cooperation with Deaf associations and/or deaf trainers, the attendees do not get the chance to practice with native signers and usually cannot attain fluency in TİD and/or familiarity with the Turkish Deaf culture. The trainers I interviewed stated that they all learned TİD by taking the same 120-hour and 200-hour courses. The absence of fluency in TİD and the lack of familiarity with the Deaf culture can be also be observed where trainers' approach to interpreting is concerned. The majority of the instructors interviewed stated that they refrain from interpreting in official/public contexts. Some trainers were also critical of the scope and the content of the courses since attendants fail to gain advanced TİD skills primarily due to time restraints and lack of teaching material. As a result, in light of the reasons listed above, one may well be skeptical about the competence of the certified attendees of the interpreting courses of the MEB.

As cited in the literature on the factors for the professionalization of public service interpreting, interpreter training and certification are among the leading factors

that must co-exist. However, in the Turkish setting, neither the duration nor the intellectual content for the interpreting training meets international standards. Likewise, there is no legal authority that certifies interpreters based on reliable criteria. The problems in interpreter training and certification also make it challenging to find a sufficient number of qualified interpreters, as shall be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Despite the issues mentioned above, it should be noted that the TİD and interpreting courses had a positive impact in the Turkish society in terms of increasing people's awareness of TİD and SLI. According to the MEB, until mid-2017, 2,651 people received SLTIT certificates in Turkey (Conker, 2017). Considering the fact that public training centers are very common in Turkey and that the courses are offered free of charge, anybody interested in TİD can learn the language to a certain extent although the course content is not sufficient to attain an advanced command of the language.

One recent and noteworthy development for the future of SLI in Turkey is the preparation of the occupational standards for sign language interpreters in 2020. Since 2006, the Vocational Qualifications Authority (Mesleki Yeterlilik Kurumu-MYK) has been establishing the occupational standards for a wide range of occupations in Turkey. The institution has since then prepared occupational standards for 508 occupations in cooperation with the relevant authorities in the respective occupational fields. Only the testing agencies which are authorized by the MYK can grant vocational qualification certificates to the applicants who successfully pass the assessment and evaluation process conducted in accordance with the MYK's guiding national occupational standards.² Authorized by the MYK, a group of experts brought together by Istanbul University prepared the occupational standards for sign language interpreters after gathering the views and recommendations of the relevant institutions in the field (such as Deaf associations and other universities). The occupational standards aim, among others, to define the skills, knowledge and qualifications a certified SLI should possess and to provide guidelines for the authorities that test and certify SLIs. The occupational standards document (document number 20UY0407-6) provides detailed guidelines for interpreter certification that range from the technical properties of the examination room to the assessment criteria that should be observed such as the qualifications – language skills, interpreting skills, knowledge of the Deaf culture, stress management, etc.– that should be evaluated assessing the examinees' performances.³ The MYK's online database of vocational qualifications includes a list of the authorized certification bodies for several vocations that are enlisted in the database. Such a list of authorized certification bodies is currently unavailable for sign language interpreting. However, it is clear that the occupational standards for sign language interpreters will ensure a standardized and robust certification regime which is prepared in accordance with the

² For more information on the MYK and the national vocational qualification certification regime, please visit <https://www.myk.gov.tr/index.php/en/vocational-qualification-certificate>

³ For more information and to download the occupational standards for sign language interpreters, please visit the MYK database https://portal.myk.gov.tr/index.php?option=com_yeterlilik&view=arama&dil=2

state-of-the-art international practices, especially when the MYK designates the reliable bodies which will start to certify SLIs.

Currently there are no undergraduate SLI programs offered by Turkish universities. The existing certification offered by the MEB, i.e., the TİD and interpreting course offered by public training centers, is open to hearing people who usually learn TİD at a later stage of their lives. On the other hand, two universities located in the capital city Ankara (Ankara University and Hacettepe University, respectively) have started graduate-level programs on TİD and sign language interpreting which is definitely a promising step forward.

4.2. Interpreters Employed by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services (AÇSHB)

Following the TİDBO interpreter certification exam in 2017, fifty-two interpreters were assigned to provincial AÇSHB offices in thirty-nine Turkish provinces (AÇSHB, personal communication, May 2019). This means that forty-two provinces still do not have official sign language interpreters. In addition, according to the interviews carried out with TİD interpreters working for the AÇSHB, a large majority of the interpreters are CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults).

One prominent point raised by the AÇSHB interpreters was the importance of raising professional awareness and knowledge of global interpreting practices since the AÇSPB interpreters, most of whom are CODAs, have no previous academic training in interpreting. The chief interpreter at the AÇSHB headquarters highlighted the significance of asking “what a translator does?” and consequently ensuring that all AÇSHB interpreters reach a consensus in terms of how they define their roles and responsibilities. This approach is reminiscent of the first stage Mikkelsen (1996) suggests for the interpreter professionalization, that is reaching a consensus regarding the role and function of interpreters in a given society. Therefore, it deserves attention and credit that the interpreters are trying to create a professional identity since their endeavors will guide future interpreters working in public sector settings. Interpreters also stated that the AÇSHB occasionally organizes trainings and seminars to this end. These trainings, delivered by academicians whose area of expertise are sign languages and/or interpreting, cover a range of topics such as the structure of sign languages and TİD, interpreting modes and their applicability in different settings, professional and ethical expectations from interpreters, and transfer of meaning and accuracy in sign language interpreting, etc. (AÇSHB interpreter, personal communication, May 2017).

During interviews with the interpreters of the AÇSHB, another key issue that was raised is the inadequate number of qualified interpreters. The interpreters underlined the urgent need for university-level sign language interpreting degree programs to meet this demand. Being CODAs, they were aware of the importance of being involved in the Deaf community to be familiar with the Deaf culture as well as the community’s problems. They specifically stressed the linguistic challenges they face on a daily basis due to varying TİD competency levels among deaf individuals they work with. One of the primary causes of varying TİD skills among the Deaf is the oralist

teaching approach adopted by Deaf schools for decades, as previously mentioned in section 3. For this reason, the AÇSHB interpreters believe that interaction with the Deaf community would make future interpreters aware of this linguistic reality and prepare them for the challenges of the profession. These views highlight once again how important it is for the government to cooperate with Deaf associations and instructors in the design and delivery of TİD and interpreting trainings so that interpreters can gain a much better insight into TİD, the Deaf community, and its problems.

Another issue that was raised was the lack of awareness among government officers on the significance of working with professional interpreters and on how to cooperate with them. It was stated that most officers are either unaware of the sign language interpreting services of the AÇSHB or that they simply choose to resort to ad hoc solutions. One of the interpreters commented on the issue as follows:

I don't think public institutions in Turkey are aware of the sign language interpreting services available through the AÇSHB interpreters. Actually, our Ministry informed other governmental institutions about our interpreting services in 2007. I am sure that my colleagues working at the provincial directorates are still doing their best to inform the Deaf community although there is no project directly led by the AÇSHB administrators in that sense. Sometimes deaf individuals can also contact us for more information. However, communication and cooperation are not at the level we initially expected. Their (other public institutions') priority is always solving the interpreting and communication issues within their offices. They resort to the assistance of other institutions only when they cannot handle the situation on their own. For this reason, I do not think that the interpreters deployed at the provincial directorates are used efficiently. (Conker, 2017)

To obtain interpreting assistance, a deaf individual or the public institution concerned delivers an official request petition to the relevant provincial directorate of the AÇSHB. According to the interpreters, the AÇSHB assigns an interpreter in the next few days after the petition is received and approved. This procedure probably discourages some public officers since they do not wish to prolong their transactions and they may think there is not much of a difference between interpreting provided by a professional interpreter or a family member/friend. This situation recalls Ozolins' (2000) emphasis on the importance of providing training for users. Raising the awareness of people working with interpreters on the significance and benefits of using certified professional interpreters is as fundamental as planning interpreting services. Also, although the necessary legal/regulatory actions have already been taken by the government to recognize the Deaf community's language rights, the number of interpreters currently employed by the AÇSHB indicates that the public service interpreting in TİD is not comprehensive and available to all. On the other hand, the installment of a video interpreting line by the AÇSHB to assist the Deaf and hard of

hearing in medical contexts may be deemed an encouraging (even if partial) solution to this problem.

4.3. The Video Interpreting Line (Engelsiz Sağlık İletişim Merkezi - ESİM)

In 2016, the AÇSHB launched the application titled ESİM, which can be translated into English as 'Accessible Healthcare Services for All'. The application aims to assist the Deaf and hard of hearing in various healthcare-related situations. The application runs on Android and IOS mobile devices and users can sign in with their Turkish Republic ID numbers. With the ESİM application, it is possible to call an ambulance, make doctor appointments, report traffic accident injuries, file complaints about the healthcare services, and request live interpreting assistance in case of communication challenges that arise during doctor appointments.

Figure 1

An ESİM interpreter is providing interpreting in TİD⁴

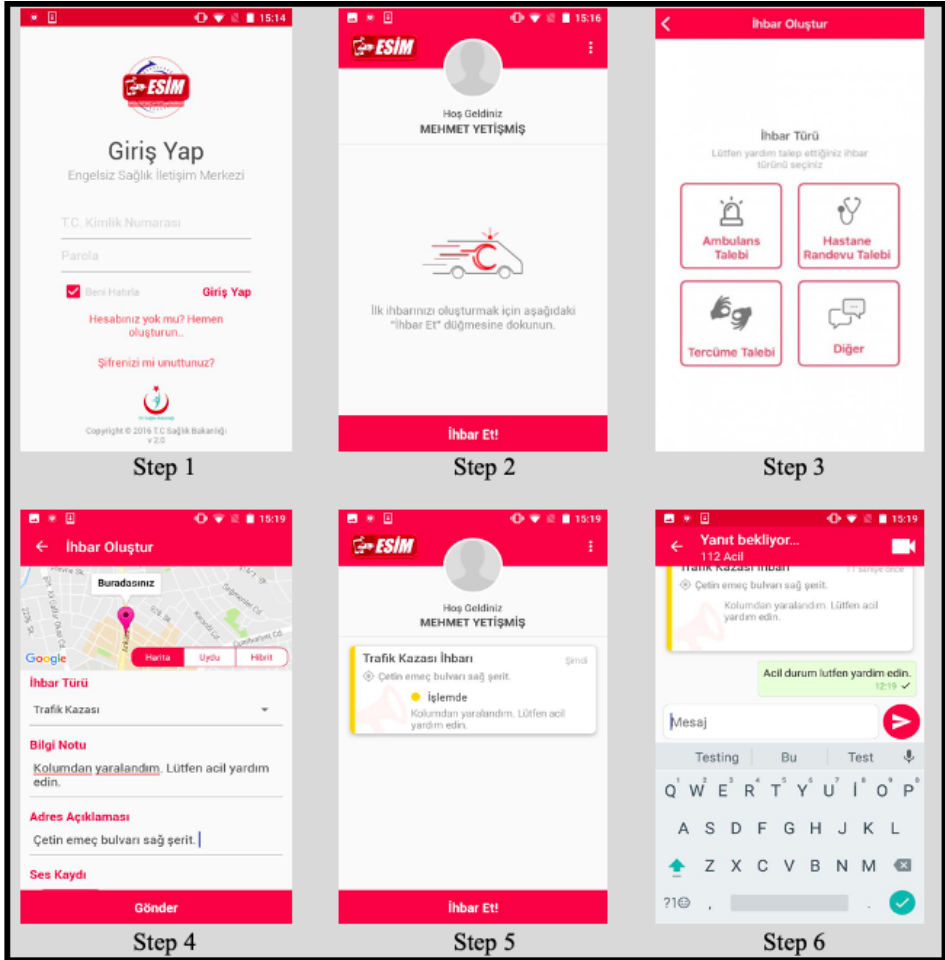


Currently, 8 interpreters and 4 healthcare personnel are stationed within the ESİM unit which operates at the AÇSHB headquarters in Ankara. The AÇSHB stated that the ESİM app has processed more than 15,000 requests although not all of them included live interpreting support (the AÇSHB, personal communication, May 2019). The application has been downloaded 10,000+ times on Google Play so far (last checked on October 2020).

⁴Source:<http://www.olay53.com/haber/engelsiz-saglik-iletisim-merkezi-esim-hizmete-sunuldu-723005.htm>
Last accessed on October 14, 2020.

Figure 2

The ESİM Application interface



This figure shows the steps for reporting a car accident using the ESİM application. The user first signs in (step 1&2) and then selects the service requested (step 3). After sharing the location of the accident (step 4), the user can trace how the request is processed (step 5) and share additional information and updates if necessary (step 6).

In addition to the AÇSPB's ESİM application of the AÇSPB, the Turkish private sector has also developed new tools for addressing the Deaf community's communication problems in recent years.

5. The private sector's interpreting initiatives

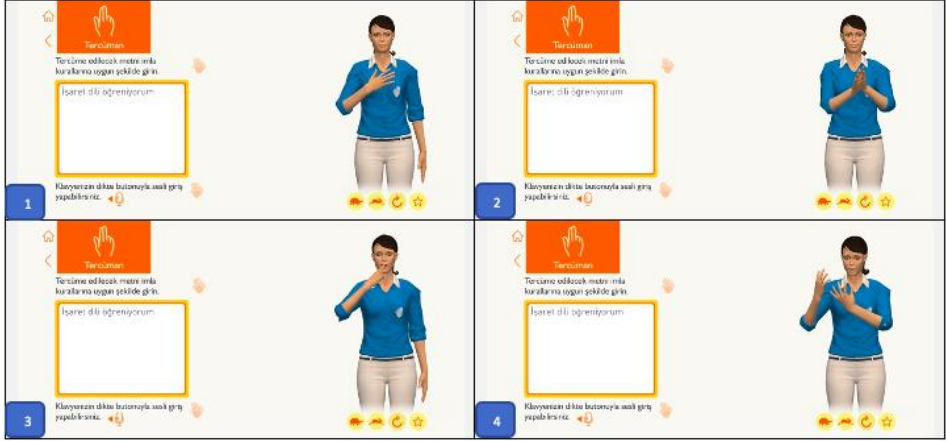
The recent developments regarding SLI in Turkey have also inspired the private sector to find solutions for the communication problems of the Deaf and hard of hearing. The majority of these initiatives concern the media sector. The state television in Turkey (TRT) has been broadcasting TV shows with accompanying sign language interpreting since the 1990s. With awareness increasing about the Deaf community in the Turkish society, several private television networks have also started broadcasting TV programs (mostly morning and/or evening news reports and talk shows) with sign language interpreting. Three popular mainstream TV channels have also initiated online platforms (Engelsiz TRT, Engelsiz Kanal D, and Engelsiz Show TV) to broadcast TV series with audio description, subtitling for the Deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), and sign language interpreting. On the other hand, since some deaf individuals have poor TİD as well as reading and writing skills in Turkish due to the problems in Deaf education, it is not clear whether the interpreting and subtitling practices are accessible to all. To highlight this issue, İmren Gökçe (2018) tested to which extent deaf individuals can comprehend TV broadcasts with SLI and SDH on 10 participants. While no participant could answer more than one comprehension question about a news broadcast with SLI, their general comprehension of a nature documentary with SDH was also low although some participants could answer up to four questions about the content. Similar to the comments of the AÇSHB interpreters about the varying TİD competency levels among deaf individuals discussed in the previous section, Gökçe's (2018) study also indicates how necessary it is to reform the education system for the Deaf in Turkey to ensure that deaf individuals acquire good TİD and Turkish skills from a very young age so that they can effectively benefit from the interpreting services provided by public and private institutions.

In recent years, mobile network operators have also developed new services that use web-based communication technology to offer solutions for the Deaf community's communication problems. For example, in July 2017, one of the leading mobile network operators in Turkey, Turkcell, launched the İşaret Dilim (My Sign Language) Application. The application, which runs on both Android and IOS mobile devices, has a virtual interpreter that can interpret sentences typed/recorded in spoken Turkish into TİD. It also has a digital TİD dictionary as well as sections dedicated to breaking news in TİD, self-improvement videos, and lectures on the structure of TİD. However, since the application offers no solution for interpreting messages from TİD into Turkish, it is not clear how helpful it can be for effective communication between the deaf and hearing users. Still, the application can help deaf users with limited Turkish writing and reading skills by providing language assistance. In addition, it can be regarded as a useful practice tool for TİD learners although there are certain aspects that need to be developed further to convey all linguistic properties of TİD. For instance, the virtual interpreter cannot perform mimics and other facial expressions, which are vital morphological and semantic units in sign languages. Thus, it would not be possible for a TİD learner to grasp the structure of TİD as a sign language based on the videos and the virtual interpreting provided on the application. Still, İşaret Dilim app is just another

indication of the growing nation-wide awareness of and interest in TİD and SLI. The fact that it has been downloaded 100,000+ times on Google Play (last checked on October 2020) may also be considered as another indication of this awareness.

Figure 3

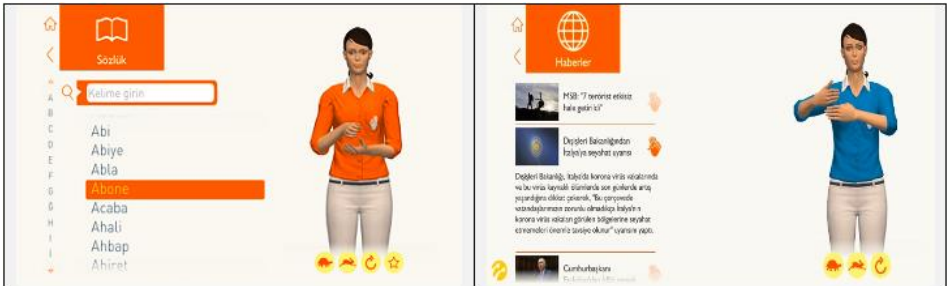
The 'İşaret Dilim' Application



Note. The virtual interpreter is interpreting the Turkish sentence 'İşaret dili öğreniyorum (I am learning sign language)' into TİD.

Figure 4

The 'İşaret Dilim' Application



Note. The digital dictionary with the virtual interpreter (on the left) and the news interpreted by the virtual interpreter (on the right).

5. The Interpreting Associations

The Association of Sign Language Interpreters (İşaret Dili Tercümanları Derneği/IDTD) was founded in 2010. The IDTD is a member of the WASLI (World Association of Sign Language Interpreters) and the EFSLI (European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters). The association has a code of ethics, prepared in line with examples taken from the WASLI and the EFSLI codes of ethics (the IDTD chair, personal communication, May 2017).

The IDTD does not consider the MEB's interpreter certification reliable. During an interview, the chair of the association expressed that the MEB's TİD and interpreting courses only provide basic TİD training and do not cater to develop adequate interpreting skills. On the other hand, the IDTD's certification is also on an ad hoc basis since an applicant's performance is judged based on the examination committee members' personal approaches towards interpreting (Conker, 2017). The IDTD's examination is similar to the 2007 and 2013 TİDBO Board certification exams, discussed in more detail in section 4.1. The association's website (<http://www.isaretdilitercumanlaridernegi.org>) is no longer active. A search on the internet about the recent activities of the association does not result in anything substantial.

In 2016, another sign language interpreters association was founded in Gaziantep, one of the most populous cities in the country, located in southeastern Turkey. Based on the information provided on its website (<http://www.tidted.org/>), the TİD TED represents interpreters in official events such as the AÇSPB's workshops. They offer TİD training and seminars in cooperation with the provincial AÇSHB office in order to inform deaf citizens about the available video-call applications and call centers. However, a close look into the association's website gives the impression that they are mostly active on local level.

Another interpreter association, entitled İşitme Engelliler, İşaret Dili Tercümanları ve Eğitmenleri Derneği (The Association for the Deaf, Sign Language Interpreters, and Trainers), was founded in Antalya, in southern Turkey in 2017. The association's website (<http://www.ieid.org.tr/index.html>) and social media accounts also give the impression that it is active on local level only.

When the literature on the professionalization of public service interpreting is revisited, the emphasis put on the importance of professional associations to lay down professional codes of conduct, to ensure that professional standards are maintained, and to provide cooperation among interpreters as well as public and private interpreting service providers is eminent. Thus, the fact that interpreters are now organizing under the roof of professional associations is a positive step forward for SLI in Turkey. However, how actively these associations promote cooperation and engage in work that aims at country-wide professionalization is unclear.

6. Conclusions

The regulations issued as of 2005 have triggered several initiatives in the public and private sectors that aim to solve the communication issues of the Deaf and hard of hearing in Turkey. Considering the factors that lead to the professionalization of interpreting services discussed in section 2, Turkey has definitely made a progress in recent years. For example, currently, there are interpreting training and certification (provided by the MEB) as well as generic interpreting services (in-person and video-call based) in public service settings. However, as Ozolins (2000) states, the real success of generic language services depends on comprehensiveness. When the issues of comprehensiveness and accessibility regarding the generic sign language interpreting services in the Turkish setting are evaluated, the general picture suggests that there are still some steps to be taken.

First, the number of SL interpreters employed by the Ministry of Family, Labor and, Social Services is not sufficient to meet the demand, as the interpreters themselves also note. Second, the country lacks interpreter training programs that can train qualified interpreters to fill this gap in the future. The current 320-hour training provided by the public training centers of the MEB does not develop advanced level TİD skills or familiarity with the Deaf culture and the linguistic problems experienced by the Deaf community. It also lacks the intellectual component to raise the participants' awareness of the ethical, social, and cultural aspects of interpreting. As a result, the majority of the interpreters working in public service settings are still CODAs, which suggests that Turkey still has not left the "pre-professional era" (Napier, 2011) of interpreting, which refers to the unprofessional phase in which only CODA individuals provide day-to-day interpreting assistance for members of the Deaf community. As Hale (2011) states, the absence of formal training damages professional identity as well since interpreters are not fully aware of their tasks, roles, rights, and obligations. The AÇSHB interpreters' endeavors to define their roles with the help of the training they request are indications of the importance of formal training. For this reason, starting graduate and post-graduate level sign language interpreting degree programs should be one of the priorities of the state to increase the quality and accessibility of the interpreting services.

Another problematic aspect in the Turkish SLI setting is the absence of a reliable interpreter certification system applicable throughout the country. However, the establishment of the occupational standards for sign language interpreters by Istanbul University for the MYK (Vocational Qualifications Authority) is a promising step for the creation of a robust country-wide certification regime. It will potentially serve as a significant guideline for this purpose, especially when the MYK designates the reliable bodies that will be authorized to certify SLIs in accordance with the occupational standards for sign language interpreters. In an optimistic future when the issues with interpreting training and certification are resolved completely, the interpreting associations will definitely bear greater responsibility for monitoring the SLI field in order to ensure that the certification regime is applied properly by the certification bodies and that the standards of practice are met by interpreters. For this reason,

professional associations must ensure transparency, cooperate with the other stakeholders efficiently, and foster professional and ethical conduct.

The improvement of Deaf education is another vital aspect that calls for more attention. The oralist education policies that have been implemented for decades have unfortunately prevented many deaf students from gaining a good command of TİD and Turkish and have left them with poor writing and reading skills. This situation jeopardizes the comprehensiveness and accessibility of the interpreting services since language barriers among the Deaf and hearing individuals can be greater than the extent interpreting can break down. Even though interpreting services are made available to the entire Deaf community, especially with the integration of web-based communication technologies, they cannot provide real solutions unless the community is fully competent in TİD. For this reason, there is an urgent need to reform Deaf schools by abandoning the oralist approach completely and integrating deaf teacher-aids into the schooling system. The current situation in Turkey demonstrates that the success of SLI services depends not only on a formal training regime for interpreters but also a successful Deaf education system that gains deaf individuals a good command of sign language as well as reading and writing skills in the spoken language. Only then can the Deaf community truly and comprehensively benefit from the available interpreting services and tools.

In an overview of the discussion presented in this paper, SLI in Turkey can be defined as a “semi-profession” in Bontempo’s (2013) words. The majority of the traits necessary for the professionalization of public service interpreting are available in the Turkish SLI setting, such as interpreter training and certification and generic interpreting services (performed both in-person and with the aid of web-based communication technologies). However, it is still not possible to assign a professional status to SLI in Turkey in the absence of “uniformly applied standards of practice,” (Bontempo, 2013, p. 34), conformity to international standards, and comprehensiveness. The failure to embrace the global state-of-the-art practices both in Deaf education and interpreter training result in serious language and interpreting competency issues and prevent the Deaf community from effectively benefiting from the interpreting services made available. On the other hand, the public and private sector initiatives undertaken so far indicate that there is potential for further improving the professional status and impact of SLI in Turkey as long as the right steps are taken collectively.

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