Bridging Silences: Analysing Triadic Communication in Job Interviews Involving Deaf Candidates, ISL Interpreters, and Employers in India

Puneet Kumar Gupta, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India
P.J. Mathew Martin, University of Mumbai, India
Anjali Pahad, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India
Varsha Parikh, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India
Sunil Sahasrabudhe, University of Mumbai, India

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines communication dynamics in job interviews involving Deaf candidates, Indian Sign Language (ISL) interpreters, and employers in urban India. Using Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), it explores how meaning is co-constructed and sometimes lost in triadic interpreted interactions. The research focuses on a Deaf livelihood fair in Mumbai, investigating how interpreters' presence shapes employers' perceptions of Deaf candidates, especially when employers lack Deaf cultural awareness. Qualitative conversation analysis of video-recorded mock interviews (Deaf participants N = 167, interpreters N = 8, employers N = 18), along with semi-structured interviews, reveals several challenges. Deaf candidates face delayed turn-taking and restricted expressiveness, while interpreters balance neutrality with cultural mediation. Employers often struggle to interpret non-verbal cues, frequently simplifying questions. Communication features such as clarification loops, repeated prompts, and lack of backchannel responses lead to misunderstandings, sometimes seen as disengagement. Motivated by India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), this study addresses persistent communication barriers despite policy mandates for inclusive hiring. The findings highlight the importance of Deaf cultural training for employers, preparatory sessions for interpreters, and greater use of visual portfolios and non-verbal strategies in interviews. By shedding light on the lived realities of Deaf job seekers, this research advocates for more ethical, linguistically inclusive employment practices for persons with disabilities in India.

Keywords: employment, disability, Indian sign language, inclusion, interpreters, challenges

Introduction

Deaf individuals in India face persistent barriers to equitable employment, despite policy frameworks like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) mandating inclusive hiring. One of the most overlooked barriers is the communication mismatch during interviews, particularly in triadic settings involving Deaf candidates, ISL interpreters, and hearing employers. These interactions are layered with cultural, linguistic, and structural complexities that impact the efficacy and equity of the hiring process.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws from Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory (Pearce, 2007), which emphasizes how individuals create and manage social realities through communication. In triadic communication, each participant contributes to and interprets the interaction differently, often leading to misaligned meanings. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1991) further informs this analysis, showing how interlocutors adjust their speech and behaviour based on perceived social distance, which in this case includes linguistic and cultural divides.

Need for the Study

While there is growing recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities in India, the specific communicative experiences of Deaf individuals in formal employment contexts remain under-researched, especially during interviews and specifically during the deaf livelihood fair. This study addresses a critical gap by focusing on the micro-level dynamics of job interviews, where first impressions and effective communication heavily influence outcomes. The insights are timely and necessary for developing inclusive recruitment policies and practices grounded in real-world challenges.

Research Methodology and Sample

The study employs content analysis as a qualitative methodology rooted in conversation analysis of (N = 167) Deaf individuals, and thematic coding. The interviews were conducted during the deaf livelihood fair, involving Deaf job seekers (N = 167), certified ISL interpreters (N = 8), and HR professionals from the private sector (N = 18). Data was collected through video recordings and semi-structured debrief interviews. Audio-visual recording with Transcripts were analysed using, ELAN (Educo Linguistic Annotator), after interpreting ISL discourses and thematic analysis to identify communication patterns, challenges, and adaptive strategies.

Analysis of the Triadic Turn-Taking Structure

Pattern Observed

Candidate (signs in ISL) → Interpreter (voices in English/Hindi) → Employer (responds verbally) → Interpreter of ISL (signs response back to candidate).

This forms a triadic interaction rather than a dyadic (two-person) conversation, leading to timing issues, delays, and shifts in pragmatic meaning.

Table 1
Depicting the Triadic Turn-Taking Structure

Step	Speaker	Mode of Communication	Notes
1	Deaf Candidate	Indian Sign Language	Original message
2	ISL Interpreter	Spoken English/Hindi	Translates signed message; may simplify or alter tone
3	Employer	Spoken English/Hindi	Responds based on interpreted message
4	ISL Interpreter	Indian Sign Language	Translates employer's response; may miss nuances or verbal emphases

Table 2
Depicting the Identified Communication Challenges During the Interview

Challenge Category	Description	Example/Implication
Clarification Requests	Interpreter frequently asks candidate/employer to repeat or rephrase.	Slows down flow; creates perception of confusion or incompetence.
Simplification of Questions	Employer's complex or jargon-filled queries are often simplified by interpreter.	Potential loss of nuance; unfair reflection of candidate's knowledge.
Reduced Back Channelling	Deaf candidate cannot easily provide quick feedback like "hmm," nodding, "okay."	Employer perceives less engagement or responsiveness.
Missed Non-Verbal Cues	Facial expressions or gestures (critical in ISL) are not seen or misinterpreted by employer.	Affects emotional tone; candidate's intent may be misunderstood.
Turn-Taking Delay	Interpreter mediation leads to unnatural gaps between questions and responses.	Perceived as awkwardness or communication difficulty.
Interpreter Bias	Interpreter may inadvertently emphasize/de-emphasize parts of the message.	Alters employer's impression of candidate's ability or attitude.

Table 3
Depicting the Patterns in Turn-Taking and Interaction

Pattern Observed	Description	Impact on Communication
Sequential Lag	Delay due to translation in both directions.	Breaks natural flow; impacts employer's perception.
Role Confusion	Interpreter sometimes oversteps and answers on behalf of the Deaf candidate.	Erodes candidate's agency and voice.
Employer Repetition	Employer frequently repeats or rewords questions to ensure clarity.	Suggests discomfort or misunderstanding.

Pattern Observed	Description	Impact on Communication
Candidate Delay in Response	Candidate pauses to understand interpreter's rendering or signs.	Employer may misinterpret as hesitation or lack of confidence.
Interpreter-Centred Flow Control	Interpreter dictates the pace of interaction.	Interpreter's skill directly impacts success of the communication.

Findings

1. **Challenges Faced by Deaf Candidates:**
   - Delayed turn-taking and reduced spontaneity.
   - Emotional hesitation due to reliance on interpretation.
   - Misinterpretation of pauses as incompetence.
2. **Challenges Faced by ISL Interpreters:**
   - Balancing literal translation with context.
   - Emotional labour in managing both parties' expectations.
   - Difficulty translating technical or culturally specific jargon.
3. **Challenges Faced by Employers:**
   - Unfamiliarity with Deaf etiquette.
   - Over-reliance on interpreter for assessing candidate.
   - Perceived disruption in interview flow.
4. **Patterns Observed:**
   - Triadic turn-taking: Candidate signs > Interpreter speaks > Employer responds > Interpreter signs.
   - Frequent clarification requests.
   - Simplification and reframing of employer questions.
   - Reduced back-channelling from Deaf candidate.
   - Missed non-verbal cues crucial in ISL communication.

Recommendations

- For Employers: Deaf awareness training, visual and alternative communication tools, maintaining eye contact with candidates.
- For Interpreters: Contextual preparation, ethical neutrality, glossary development.
- For Deaf Candidates: Mock interviews with interpreters, use of visual aids and portfolios.

Conclusion

Effective communication is essential for truly inclusive hiring, especially in settings where Deaf individuals participate through programs like the Deaf Livelihood Fair. This study explores the complex and often overlooked communication dynamics between Deaf candidates, Indian Sign Language (ISL) interpreters, and hearing employers.

Simply having an interpreter present does not guarantee equal communication. Our findings show that real inclusion depends not only on language translation but also on empowering Deaf candidates to express themselves freely, ensuring they are fully understood, and enabling their active participation. We describe communication equity here as an

environment where all three parties—the Deaf candidate, interpreter, and employer—can exchange information openly and fairly, without losing meaning, control, or respect.

This concept goes beyond just providing sign language access. It involves how interpreters position themselves, how accurately messages are conveyed, the Deaf candidate's chance to ask questions or clarify points, and the employer's willingness to engage beyond spoken language norms. In many interviews we studied, communication equity was interrupted by inconsistent interpreting, poor interpreter placement, or missed non-verbal signals.

Therefore, to make disability-inclusive hiring truly effective, recruitment processes must formally recognize communication equity as a fundamental principle. This means focusing not only on the availability but also on the quality, ethical standards, and context-sensitive approach of interpreting services. Employers and HR teams need proper training to support this three-way communication, helping reveal and appreciate the Deaf candidate's strengths.

Only by respectfully bridging the communication gap, rather than merely filling silence, can we create genuinely inclusive and participatory workplaces.

Acknowledgements

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Contact emails: puneet.g-extcomm@msubaroda.ac.in
                    puneet76in@gmail.com