Media Interpreting Into Malaysian Sign Language
Adaptations and strategies

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ABSTRACT: During the two years that Malaysia was under intermittent lockdown under the COVID-19 pandemic, the public paid close attention to the daily media briefings from the Ministry of Health and Home Affairs Ministry. While the public waited eagerly for the press conferences, a small corner of the television screen with a gesturing individual caught their imagination, and there were many viral memes and discussions in the social media. This study examines these public perceptions through the lens of personal accounts and retrospective interviews with each of the sign language interpreters to examine the challenges and demands they encountered when working in the context of a civil and health emergency. The impact, control measures, and general wellbeing of these sign language interpreters pre-, during, and post-coverage are analyzed to provide comprehensive insight into their experiences of the Catch-22 situations where they found it difficult to break away. These personal accounts are contrasted with the perceptions of the Malaysian Deaf Community, who were highly critical of the interpreters' skills regarding their understanding of the degree of accessibility and the quality of their interpretation of technical and critical information under

circumstances when the interpreters themselves and the audience were under tremendous stress from the bombardment of dire news, global uncertainties, and unrelieved economic pressures. This study debunks many of the myths and misconceptions of the public on the Deaf Community and sign language interpreters, such as the use of a standardized or universal sign language, the environmental demands of interpreting during a crisis, the conflicting interpersonal and intrapersonal moments experienced by the interpreters, and the linguistic and paralinguistic demands encountered during the press conferences. Even interpreters with many decades of interpreting on television and in the community found their personal worldviews as well as their understanding of their role and their profession dramatically altered and reassessed because of interpreting during these two unprecedented years.

KEYWORDS: Malaysian Sign Language, remote simultaneous interpretation, crisis interpreting, emergency broadcast, accessibility

논문초록: 지난 2년간 코로나19 유행으로 간헐적 봉쇄 조치를 겪은 말레이시아의 대중은 보건부와 내무부의 일일 언론 브리핑에 크게 주목하였다. 대중이 이제나저제나 하며 기자회견을 기다리는 가운데, TV 화면 속 한 귀퉁이에 등장한 사람의 몸짓은 이들의 상상력을 자극했고 SNS에서 유행한 각종 밈(meme)과 논의의 대상으로 떠올랐다. 본 연구는 수어 통역사 개개인의 이야기와 회상적 면접(retrospective interview)을 통해 이러한 대중의 인식을 살펴봄으로써 시민사회 및 보건 비상사태의 맥락에서 이들이 업무 중 직면하는 도전과제와 요구사항을 검토한다. 방송 전, 방송 중, 방송 후에 수어 통역사에게 미치는 영향과 통제책, 이들의 전반적 건강(wellbeing)을 분석하여 수어 통역사가 경험한 진퇴양난의 상황에 대한 종합적인 통찰을 제시한다. 이러한 개개인의 이야기는 말레이시아 농사회(Deaf Community)의 인식과 대조를 이룬다. 쉴 틈없이 전해지는 심각한 소식, 전 세계적 불확실성, 극심한 경제적 압력으로 인해 통역사 스스로와 시청자 모두 엄청난 스트레스를 받는 상황에서, 접근성 수준에 대한 통역사의 이해 능력, 그리고 기술적 정보 및 중요 정보에 대한 이들의 해석에 대해 말레이시아 농사회는 매우 비판적인 시각을 견지하였다. 본 연구는 표준화된 또는 보편적인 수어의 사용, 위기 상황 속 통역을 위한 환경적 요구사항, 통역사들이 경험하는 대인적 및 내적 갈등의 순간, 기자회견 시 직면하는 언어적 및 준언어적 요구사항 등 농사회와 수어 통역사에 대한 대중의 근거 없는 믿음과 오해를 상당 부분 불식한다. TV 방송 및 지역사회에서 수십 년간 활동해 온 통역사들조차도 지난 2년간의 전례 없는 상황 속에서 통역을 수행하면서 개인적 세계관은 물론 스스로의 역할 및 직업에 대한 이해에 대대적 변화와 재평가가 이루어졌음을 확인하게 되었다.

핵심어: 말레이시아 수어, 원격 동시통역, 위기통역, 비상방송, 접근성

1. Introduction

This study aims to provide practical insight into how to manage heightened stress during national broadcasts in the highly demanding profession of real-time interpreting (Jiménez Serrano, 2011; Kurz, 2002). Despite the report by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) that press conferences were interpreted in as many as 80 countries during the pandemic (WFD, 2010), studies of the role and challenges experienced by sign language interpreters are very rare. This paper aims to investigate the perspectives of highly experienced sign language interpreters working under such conditions.

Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) has been providing video inserts with *Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia* (BIM), or Malaysian Sign Language, interpreters for the daily national bulletin since the 1990s. In addition, live broadcasts of special messages by the Prime Minister on special occasions such as Independence Day Celebration and New Year's Day and during festivals such as Lunar New Year and Eid Mubarak have also included BIM interpreters. These broadcasts are generally considered routine interpreting work under normal conditions.

At the onset of the pandemic, BIM interpreters at RTM were tasked with interpreting for the daily live updates and press conferences by the Minister of Home Affairs and Director-General of Health, each session of which can last from 30 minutes to 2 hours. The interpreters had to work under extreme conditions, as the pool of interpreters consists of two senior interpreters who have worked for more than 20 years and one relatively new interpreter with less than three years' experience working as an interpreter on television.

The inclusion of interpreters in television broadcasts to communicate emergency measures was unprecedented; none of the interpreters had experience or special training in interpreting live broadcasts during the tense situation of an emergency in which the situation evolves rapidly with many uncertainties. In addition, the interpreters faced immense pressure to remain professional and calm as the whole nation paid close attention to every word said by the ministers and the questions raised by journalists in each of the broadcasts. Their more frequent appearances on TV, especially during critical broadcasts, garnered strong responses from the Deaf community, the public, and policy makers.

Illustration 1: Special Address by the Prime Minister with sign language interpreter insert

On the nature of the sign language itself, it is important to note that although BIM is recognized as the native language of the Deaf in Malaysia under the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685), it is a young language that is in the process of standardization. There is a clear difference in the use of sign language between the young, who are taught a manually coded signing system in school called *Kod Tangan Bahasa Melayu* (KTBM), which follows Malay word order and grammar, and the older generation, who were exposed to American Sign Language in the late 50s and early 60s when the first batch of teachers was trained in ASL. In addition, lexical signs vary from city to city, and BIM syntax lacks a dominant word order (Chew, 2019).

1.1 Working Conditions of BIM Interpreters during the Pandemic

Despite the vigorous efforts of international organizations such as the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), the WFD, and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), as well as national associations such as the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD) and the Malaysian Sign Language Associations (MyASLI) that had been advocating that optimal working conditions be established and maintained years before the pandemic, the guidelines and best practices had to be immediately

expanded to handle the massive shift in working environments and the rapid demands for interpreters to work in the media for public broadcast by the respective government.

It has long been understood that interpreters have a limited cognitive availability at any time to meet the demands of interpreting, which is a complex multiphase activity (Gile, 1995). Any increase in the cognitive load for a particular task without a corresponding decrease in load for another will result in a miscue or interpreting error (Cheung, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary for interpreters to work in teams, as this allows the interpreters to summon external cognitive resources such as asking one's partner for a feed or alternate interpretation, and when the active interpreter's mind is saturated, the passive interpreter can take over. All these arrangements fell apart during the pandemic, as only one interpreter was allowed to be in the studio at one time.

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that the impact on cognitive resources of simultaneous interpreting between two language modalities leads to cognitive overload, resulting in fatigue and significant degradation in accuracy and language use (Macnamara et al., 2011). Other studies have found that the optimum processing time for quality interpretation is 20–30 minutes; the interpreter experiences fatigue and increased stress levels over longer periods, impairing the quality of the output (Gabrian & Williams, 2015). Interpreters have also reported signs of burnout, pain, and arm injuries, especially when having to interpret for extended periods. However, during media briefings, the interpreters had to work for up to 2 hours without breaks due to the shortage of interpreters and the strict COVID-19 control measures in place.

Such working conditions during media briefings have been a matter of concern for the interpreters. From an occupational health perspective, numerous quantitative analytic studies have shown the impact of sign language interpretation on the physical wellbeing of the interpreter, such as increased risks of repetitive motion injury, cumulative motion injury, and carpal tunnel syndrome, which can lead to chronic conditions (Delisle et al., 2005; Feuerstein & Fitzgerald, 1992; Madden, 1995; Podhorodecki & Spielholz, 1993; Stedt, 1992). All three of the interpreters assigned to interpret during COVID-19 media briefings (whose ages ranged from their early 40s to their late

50s) reported varying degrees of physical soreness due to prolonged sitting as well as the arm and hand movements required to perform the task.

1.2 Schlossberg's Model for Analyzing the Human Adaptation to Transition

In order to better understand how the media interpreters were forced to immediately respond to the rapidly evolving situation, Schlossberg (1981) provides a robust model of how the adaptation of adults to transition depends on factors such as their perception of the transition, the characteristics of the transition environments, and their individual characteristics. All these factors interact to yield one of two possible outcomes: The individual succeeds in or fails to adapt to the transition, regardless of whether the transition is gradual or sudden (Schlossberg, 1981).

Therefore, applying Schlossberg's framework to examine the impact on the interpreters who were urgently required in the media briefings helps to frame the conditions of the interpreters in responding to the situation. According to Schlossberg's view of the first category i.e., individual's perceptions of the transition, the situation encountered by these interpreters

Figure 1: Schlossberg's (1981) model for analyzing human adaptation to transitions
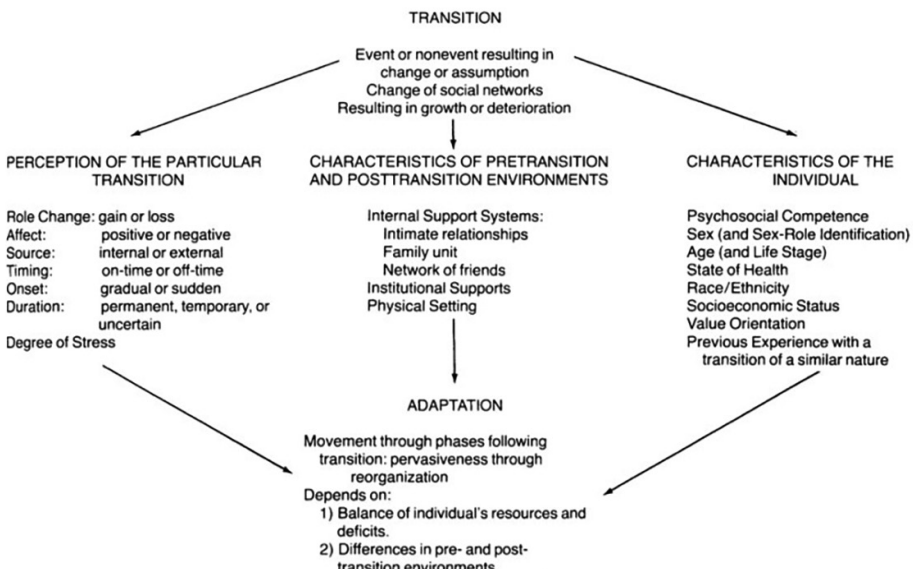
are:

Role Change: Gain or Loss – The role of the interpreters has passed beyond merely interpreting the daily news but has become of urgent national interest. The interpreters found themselves labelled as providing "essential services" during the pandemic and were given special letters that allowed them to leave their homes when the entire nation was on strict lockdown. They were relieved of their other responsibilities, such as interpreting for the courts and in education settings, and priority was given to interpreting for the media briefings. In addition, the interpreters were more "visible" to the public; as the media briefings had very high viewerships, they were constantly under public scrutiny.

Affect: Positive or Negative – Schlossberg (1981, pp. 8-9) claims that most transitions have both negative and positive elements. Regardless, both involve some degree of stress in the individual experiencing the transition.

Source: Internal or External – Some changes were the results of deliberate decision by the interpreters (internal), such as accepting the task to provide interpretation during the media briefings, whereas others were against their will (external), such as the extended duration and the mode of the media briefings.

Onset: Gradual or Sudden – Although working from the studio is a norm for the interpreters, the transition to having the speakers and the entire event take place remotely without support was sudden and unexpected, leaving no room for preparation or rehearsal.

Duration: Permanent, Temporary, Uncertain – The interpreters were clear that such a transition would not be permanent, despite the buzzword during the pandemic of the "new normal"; hence this task caused heightened stress, as the greatest negativity is directly related to situations deemed uncertain.

In terms of the second main category, i.e., the characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments, Schlossberg identified the following three factors:

Interpersonal Support: Although interpreters are generally a diverse group of people, they share overlapping acquaintances, friends, and communities, which is common among sign language users, regardless of one's status as hearing or Deaf. Inevitably, each of the interpreters would

at one point solicit help from these groups as a form of professional and personal support.

Institutional Support: The main support for the interpreters was from the technical team and their colleagues at the national television station who helped them set up in the studio.

Physical Setting: Their living arrangements were also a concern for the interpreters, as they might live with members of vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and those with co-morbidity; hence significant changes must be made for the interpreters such as moving to an isolated room in their home or moving to another house during the period.

The third major category is the characteristics of the individuals, namely their psychosocial competence, sex, life stage, state of health, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature. The characteristics relevant for this study are included in the discussion of the data elicited for this study, and will be dealt with in detail in the next section. During the period of interpreting at the media briefings, one of the interpreters suffered a major epileptic seizure and had to take a break from interpreting to recuperate for many months. Although no direct correlation can be made with factors such as the level of stress due to the demand of the tasks, it is noted that the interpreter had not suffered such a serious episode for many years prior.

2. Methodology

As the special addresses were broadcast live across many different television channels and social media platforms, public visibility precluded any attempts at anonymity. A brief overview of the backgrounds of the three interpreters is relevant, as they are well known to the Deaf Community in Malaysia. One of the most regular interpreters, Lee Bee (LB), who is now recognized among the public, is one of the pioneers in interpreting the prime-time news since the mid-1990s. Khairunnisa Kho Abdullah, better known as Nisa among the Deaf, taught at a Deaf school before going to work full time as a freelance interpreter. She too has been interpreting in prime-time news since the 1990s. The third interpreter, Samuel Chew, who is relatively new, made his first TV

appearance in 2020.

The data for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with two of the individuals who interpreted for the Prime Minister during his emergency addresses in 2020–2021 as well as the daily media briefings by the Director-General of Health and Home Affairs Minister. One of the authors of this article was also one of the main interpreters for the addresses and provides introspection and analysis of the elicited information. Four categorical factors proposed by McKee (2014) in a study of sign language interpreters in Australia and New Zealand working under extreme conditions during natural disasters serve as the framework for this study; they are environmental, linguistic, paralinguistic, and interpersonal.

The data for the four categories are analyzed following McKee (2014), such that the specific demands are classified according to the four factors in terms of the respective controls used by the BIM interpreters during the media briefings and special address. The following figure is an example taken from McKee (2014, appendix):

Figure 2: Demands and controls experienced by interpreters in civil emergency briefings (McKee, 2014)

Linguistic and Paralinguistic Demands	Controls
1. Specialised (low frequency) vocabulary and technical descriptions.	1. Seek preparation material (verbal, written) via appropriate personnel; find explanatory information in external sources.
2. Lack of established SL equivalents for special terms.	2. Paraphrase; define any fingerspelled terms; use productive (classifier) signs; strategic omission if term not critical to message.
3. Highly local nominal reference to places, processes, people.	3. Consistent interpreting team to increase familiarity; draw on local knowledge; consult Deaf community for situational referents.
4. Alternation of spontaneous and scripted speech styles.	4. Apply text analysis skills — prediction, closure, synthesis, cohesion.
5. Euphemistic and indirect phrasing.	5. Paraphrase or expand/explicate euphemisms.
6. Pace and speaker transitions.	6. Vary delivery pace and lag time; strategic summarising; vary free/literal techniques.

3. Discussion

Dean and Pollard Jr (2001) proposed a demand-control model of workplace stress to analyze the factors that affect interpreting outcome (demand) and the skills, knowledge, and strategies used by interpreters to mitigate their effects (control). The four demands for categories are environmental (features of the setting), interpersonal (relations between participants), paralinguistic (delivery features of the communication), and intrapersonal (internal states of the interpreter's mind and body). The interpreters' perspectives on the demands during interpreting for the Prime Minister's special addresses and daily media briefings by the Health and Home Affairs Ministry are thematically discussed based on these categories as a "constellation of concurrent demand" (Dean & Pollard Jr, 2011).

Findings of Li et al. (2022) suggest interpreters at press conferences tend to add intensifiers to facilitate the understanding of target language listeners, yet similar behavior by sign language interpreters at press conferences has not been investigated extensively. The insights obtained from the interviews debunked many of the misconceptions of their peers and the public on the challenges and adaptation strategies that the interpreters used under such pressing circumstances. In the past, interpreters worked very much in isolation and would rarely seek help from the local and international Deaf Community for unfamiliar signs. For example, although there are signs for countries, interpreters often resort to spelling instead of seeking clarification from the Deaf community or external sources to ascertain the signs. Greater efforts were also seen among the core team of interpreters in helping each other grapple with new terminology and concepts. The interpreters reported that they called and texted each other much more frequently during the course of interpreting for the media briefings. The interpreters also increased their frequency of watching their colleagues. One of the interpreters commented:

> In the past, I didn't watch other interpreters because I didn't want to be influenced by their signing. Also, there is a pride in telling myself that there is nothing that I can learn from their signing. However, during this period, I began to watch my colleagues more often and discussed with them to

ensure we used consistent signs among ourselves. When I listened to their explanations of how they unpacked certain phrases or words, I found myself more ready to consider their perspective.

3.1 Environmental Demands

A recent study by De Meulder et al. (2021) of more than 2500 sign language interpreters from over 60 nations showed that a significant number of them reported that remote interpreting is more stressful than physical interpreting, citing reasons such as interpreting in 2D instead of 3D, no/less ability to manage the ongoing discussions, and difficulty working as a team, which is important for sign language interpreters to fill missing information gaps, as well as no physical Deaf audience to provide real-time feedback through facial cues. The same study also reported that 61% of a smaller pool of interpreters are selective of their online clients. Similar factors interacted for our group of BIM interpreters, and to a certain extent were intensified, as they did not have much say in whether they could accept or reject the tasks of interpreting the media briefings.

The live feed of the two daily media briefings was broadcast live from the administrative capital, Putrajaya, while the interpreters were stationed at a studio situated within the television main broadcast center located in Kuala Lumpur. Although the studio was a familiar environment for the interpreters, they were unable to fully capture the tensions at the location. One interpreter explained:

> Very often the reporters were drilling the Home Minister on the SOPs, and sometimes the audio was not clearly audible to me. Sometimes there would be 20–30 seconds where I couldn't really hear what the journalist was asking and so I could not interpret the questions. Only the minister's audio was clear, and therefore when I interpreted his responses, the message was truncated.

Apart from the audio feed, some of the interpreters observed that some of their colleagues were also not able to capture the gist of the message when the journalist posed highly technical questions inevitably asked in English

involving such terms as RTK-antigen and R-nought, which were then the latest developments regarding COVID-19. One interpreter observed:

> Prior to COVID-19, the news interpreters had only to interpret purely from Bahasa Melayu (Malay) into BIM. This was the language requirement when they were contracted to interpret on national television. However, the briefings were unscripted and English terms were used extensively in a separate location, so the interpreters were not able to seek clarifications. Often the interpreted message appeared vague at best, and many times the message could be totally misconstrued.

Another regular interpreter for the media briefings commented:

> Many of the terms were unfamiliar to me. For example, when "incubator" was mentioned by the journalist during the press conference, I had no idea what that was in the context of COVID-19. We had to resort to spelling, which is not ideal in facilitating the understanding of the Deaf community, but we had no choice as the location didn't allow us any chance to seek further clarifications. If I were there at the physical location, I would be able to seek clarifications from the reporters. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the number of people allowed at the press conferences was strictly controlled.

As for the Prime Minister's Special Address, the environmental challenges were less taxing for the interpreters, as he would be presenting it from his office from a prepared text for 15–20 minutes without any interruption. He would read it from a prepared text, and the environment was calm with visual inserts to enhance his key message.

3.2 Linguistic Demands

The linguistic demands during media briefings were challenging for most of the interpreters, as novel and rarely used terms such as PCR, MySejahtera (an app developed to monitor the movement of citizens), clusters, co-morbidity, variants of interest, variants of concern, pandemic, endemic, antigen tests,

and R-nought were used. Even the sign for COVID-19 evolved rapidly from an interim sign such as "Wuhan Virus" before the team of interpreters agreed to adopt the sign used by the global Deaf community.

Names of places had to be spelled out, as many obscure towns became household names overnight due to the rapid spread of the virus in those areas. The strategy used by the interpreters was to forego the list of names and point the audience to the names on display on the screen as they were announced. Figures of cases, deaths, and recoveries were also challenging, as the numbers can amount to millions. This is consistent with the findings of Cheung (2014a, 2009, 2008) that numbers could be challenging and interpreters with no training in interpreting numbers tend to have the highest frequency of omissions.

Despite the many attempts by the interpreters to pool their resources and seek clarification from Deaf community leaders on standardized signs, it was not able to keep up with the linguistic demands during the press conferences, as many new terms appeared very rapidly. Also, the interpreters had to be conscious of when to use signs that appear to be gesture-like such as "panic" and "plead", as they were quickly caught by the public and turned into viral memes with the faces of the interpreters visible in them. This inevitably attracted amused comments from speakers and the public, which turned the occasional spotlight uncomfortably on the interpreters.

Another challenging situation for the interpreters was to decide on the spur of the moment how to convey euphemisms and slogans used by the government during the press conferences such as "Just Stay at Home", "*Kitajagakita*" (loosely translated as "looking out for each other"), and "*Kitabelummenang*" ("we have not won"), which alludes to COVID-19 measures as being on the battlefield. The interpreters highlighted that preparation was crucial for them to interpret well during the media briefings. One of the interpreters explained:

> As the COVID-19 situation evolved very quickly, drastic and immediate measures had to be taken by the government to curb the situation. As interpreters, we had to keep abreast with not just local news but constantly update ourselves with what is happening globally in terms of vaccines, lockdown measures, virus mutations, etc. We were glued to the computer

screen and pored through the different official websites such as WHO to ensure we could capture every piece of information and question raised during the media briefing. It was very time-consuming and exhausting. As there were mainly three interpreters tasked with the media briefings, we communicated in a WhatsApp group to share information and updates.

The Prime Minister's addresses were generally less taxing on the interpreters in terms of linguistic demands, as even though his speech was embargoed, his speech register was casual and targeted at the public, unlike the media briefings where the focus was scientific and medical information. One of the interpreters commented:

> The PM spoke like how a father would speak to his children. The mood was relaxed, and the words were lay terminology and easily understood. There was no jargon, just plain day-to-day language. That gave us a good break from the tense daily media briefings.

3.3 Paralinguistic Demands

The pace of the information during the scripted monologues was challenging for all the interpreters, as it included many figures such as confirmed cases, number of patients recovered, and deaths as well as strings of the names of the villages, towns, and cities affected by COVID-19. In addition to a dense body of proper nouns, new technical terms abounded; under time pressure, all interpreters had to be selective and made conscious omissions (Napier, 2002), occasionally resorting to summarizing techniques (Cheung, 2007), as it was not possible for the interpreter to signal to the speaker or journalist to slow down or repeat themselves because they were in two separate locations. There was also no studio assistant present who could come to the aid of the interpreter due to the need for physical distancing. Under these circumstances, the interpreters had to rely heavily on discourse mapping, anticipation, and reformulation to ensure that the message was coherent.

Although discourse was primarily monologic, the question/answer periods during the media briefings entailed a series of questions eagerly asked by reporters. The interpreter needed to remember the sequence and gist of

the questions being asked to ensure coherence when the ministers finally answered, sometimes not in the same sequence. In addition, the visual on screen would change rapidly between the reporters and the ministers who would be answering the questions. An interesting point that an interpreter noted is the use of "Pointing+noun" to refer to the minister instead of signing his honorific titles as commonly uttered by the reporters, although the minister was not physically in the same space as the interpreter. This appears consistent with another study that showed that "the use of third person pronouns may be perceived as a sign of the interpreter's detachment from the source-language speaker, whereas the use of professional titles may be perceived as indicating that the interpreter is aligned with the speakers" (Cheung, 2012, p. 205).

One of the interpreters commented:

> It increases the cognitive load of the interpreter to have to remember details of the questions raised, and some were very technical questions relating to figures and recent vaccine development. During those moments, I had to make a mental note of the key terms and insert them during the answer given by the minister to ensure that the message was coherent. For example, I would sign, "Earlier, the reporter asked about R-nought and the minister (noun reference used instead of his honorific title) is responding to that question."

Moreover, during the media briefing by the Director-General (DG) of Health, his answers were supported by facts provided by his assistants, who might just appear briefly on screen, and the interpreter would have to remember who they were and where they were standing, as the DG would look to them to obtain information when fielding questions from the reporters. This also increased the demand for concentration by the interpreter, who not only needed to focus on the message but also on the surroundings where the media was taking place in a different location from the interpreter. Under such circumstances, there were occasions where the interpreters resorted to indirect speech, which inevitably influenced the audience perception of the interpreter as being aligned or otherwise with one or more of the interlocutors as they were switching very quickly on the screen

(Cheung, 2018, 2014b).

3.4 Intrapersonal Emotional Demands

The task of interpreting two daily media briefings that lasted for more than an hour was shared among three interpreters who were on rotation, whereby each interpreted one entire hour-long session alone, as the number of staff members allowed on the premises of the national broadcasting station was strictly regulated. This was during the time when there was strict movement control implemented throughout the country and police roadblocks were widespread, resulting in much longer times to commute from home. Also, it was emotionally and physically draining for at least one of the interpreters, who lived with an elderly parent. One interpreter stated:

> I think most of us would rather have stayed home during that time, as going outside meant increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19. Also, it was physically and emotionally tiring having to interpret media briefings so often, and reports that were nothing but dire news day after day. Most of the interpreters hoped that someone else would be willing to replace them or at least that there would be a possibility of interpreting remotely from home, but in the end, we had to bite the bullet and interpret to the best of our ability.

Relaying bad news such as the number of deaths, which was rising daily, was emotionally demanding. Although the three interpreters are strongly religious, though of different faiths (Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian), each recalls having to strive to the utmost to be professionally detached when announcing details of the deceased. The strategy that the interpreters adopted was to focus on interpretation without succumbing to "vicarious trauma" (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012). One of the interpreters commented:

> It was probably one of the most stressful stretches of interpreting in my long career and the thought of the news lingers for a long time. It was terrible having to deal with the fact that many had lost their lives and that their number was increasing each day. We just had to do our job while

trying not to be saddened by such news, which was hard, as our emotions were very visible on our faces. I often had to rush home and destress with my dogs to keep myself going, knowing that I must do this all over again in less than 24 hours.

The interpreters did not receive any peer feedback or seek supervision beyond casual exchange of messages and phone calls to de-stress The lack of peer feedback is common among professional interpreters at international organizations such as the United Nations (Cheung, 2019). It is argued in psychology literature that counseling methods to revisit emotional responses can trigger re-traumatization instead of promoting resilience in service providers (Hawker et al., 2011). The interpreters turned to their respective faith and meditation to maintain their wellbeing.

4. Interpretation Quality

It has long been known that there is a close relationship between processing time and the quality of interpreting, as shown by the finding of Cokely (1992) regarding English to American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters that shorter processing times result in more miscues, while longer processing time is correlated to more native-like language production. In another study by Napier (2003) of Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN) interpreters analyzing omissions from a sociolinguistic perspective, the frequency of omissions was found to be positively correlated with the density of the text. Both these elements impaired the performance of the interpreters during the media briefings (Cheung, 2012), as not only did the reporters often pose loaded questions, but the rapid exchanges between the ministers and the reporters directly reduced the amount of processing time that the interpreters had, reducing the fluency of their production (Song & Cheung, 2019). The interpreters expressed frustration when interpreting during the media briefing:

The reporters would be standing up one after another, each reading out a host of questions, which were often loaded, depending on which news

agency they are working for. Sometimes, before they could finish their questions, someone would cut them off and respond almost immediately. Before I could process the question, I would find myself having to listen to a saturated response, and under such circumstances where I had no partner to rely on to feed me information that I might have missed, I had to sacrifice some details by making conscious omissions for the sake of coherence. It was at these moments that I felt I had failed to produce a faithful rendition from the source language to my target audience. Nevertheless, I would still effortfully remember the details that I could not render at that time, and filled it in whenever there was a suitable opportunity. The quality of my interpretation was compromised, but at least I know that the Deaf audience did not miss anything.

However, the interpreters recall that when they reviewed their interpreting later, they noticed that their signing became less native-like after 30 minutes and that they made omissions without realizing it. They also realized that their own and their colleagues' facial expressions were reduced, which had a great impact on the meaning. Their exhaustion was increasingly visible in their movements, which became slower, and in their eyes, indirectly affecting their countenance. The interpreters comment:

We would randomly review our own interpreting as well as our colleagues' to provide peer feedback whenever possible. It was then that we realized that we were not doing a good job, as our signing became transliteration instead of interpreting. We were merely matching the spoken words into sign, which completely renders it gibberish to Deaf people who are not well-versed in spoken English or Malay. Also, our faces look so tired and the only thing I can recall from that moment was I am all sweaty and tired and the voice in my heart telling me, "Oh, please wrap up, I just want to get off the camera NOW!"

4.1 Public and Deaf Responses

As sign language interpreters were conspicuous and appeared on television regularly when many people were forced to stay home and watched the

media briefings and special announcements, they inevitably attracted many comments, and some clips became materials for viral memes. Overall, the responses from the Deaf audience in terms of quality have been higher than to the regular daily news in the past, as observed in the plethora of discussions throughout the two years in social media and Deaf-related chat groups, in which many expressed satisfaction with the information that they were given during the media briefings. Nevertheless, this perception could be biased, as argued by Cheung (2022), in that the higher reported quality could be due to the greater perceived dependence on the interpreting.

On the issue of the interpreters serving as a source of viral memes, although the Deaf community was generally displeased, as they saw it as disrespectful to their language, most of the interpreters took it with good humor. One of the interpreters commented:

> Although some may see the interpreters as being funny, I think the public
> was generally bored and stressed at home and used their creativity to

Illustration 2: One of the memes that went viral

make light-hearted memes, although sometimes at the expense of the sign language interpreters. But I don't see them as ill-intentioned. Any form of publicity, whether it is good or bad, is helpful to raise awareness about the existence of the Deaf in our society.

Interpreters may occasionally become a scapegoat for being different (Cheung, 2015). Some people who are not proficient in sign languages may perceive sign language interpreters as different and will therefore have no qualms about making fun of them. In the discussion within the Deaf community, although generally appreciative of the inclusion of sign language in public discourse, as it signified the government's acknowledgement of the Deaf community and their linguistic needs, some members felt that it was offensive to make fun of sign language interpreters, as it seemed like making fun of the language itself. This is because as facial expressions are an integral part of the grammar of the language (Chew, 2019), creating memes that take the expressions out of context is disrespectful to the community.

Nevertheless, as interpreters became a popular subject of interviews in radio and print media, many of the misconceptions were demystified, and although the interpreters often tried to direct the interviewers to representatives of Deaf organizations, media interest seemed fixated on the individuals with media presence. Under such pressure, some of the interpreters agreed to be interviewed, but most expressed their strong intention to promote the importance of sign language access for the Deaf community and turn the spotlight to the needs of the Deaf community instead. One of the interpreters stated:

There were so many requests for me to teach sign language and to talk more about Deaf culture and history. As an interpreter, I remained clear about my role and would always point them to the respective Deaf organizations that offer sign language classes and encourage them to invite Deaf community leaders to share about their culture and history.

5. Conclusion

Results of this study suggest that sign language interpreters faced constraints and difficult working conditions when working in a media setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies and qualities that these sign language interpreters mustered during prolonged challenging conditions provide crucial insight into how to overcome similar situations in the future in cases of very little time and space for the interpreters to manage the concomitant psychological and linguistic demands.

This study indicates a strong need for the training of even seasoned interpreters to deal with such situations, as they must possess strong emotional resilience, the ability to make rapid decisions on how to effectively transfer critical information to an audience with a wide range of knowledge from the illiterate to the highly educated without the opportunity of receiving real-time feedback, and the ethical maturity to deal with the situation on- and offscreen with the Deaf community and public.

One of the objectives of this study is to provide practical reflections for interpreters who might face similar situations. Interpreters are a resilient and highly adaptable group of people. It is their resiliency in the face of many struggles and uncertainties that helped the interpreters work effectively during this unprecedented situation, a conclusion that resonates with the findings of McKibbin (2021) on sign language interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study concerns only a few interpreters, as the media briefings mainly involved three interpreters who are more proficient in both English and Malay which are the main languages used during those events. However, should the on-going pandemic continue and more interpreters are required for media sessions, interpreters with a varied degree of English proficiency and experience would be necessary. A follow up study can be carried out when the curriculum to train sign language interpreters in times of crisis is implemented to examine the significance of this demand-control model

for trained versus untrained interpreters. Such a study can thus substantiate the need for specific interpreter training and to analyze the cost-benefit of interpreter training. In addition, a multi-country language typology study would also be insightful to compare the extent of how this model can be used to improve training programs for both spoken and sign language interpreters in the face of unpredictable crises in the future.

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