

**Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration**  
**Prof. Hemachandran Karah**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology - Madras**

**Lecture – 32**  
**ISL Workshop Day 3 – Part 2**  
**Sign Vocabulary and the Dictionary of ISL**

Like you mentioned; we lack a lot of deaf people in the field of technology and IT and also in linguistics and that field so we have a lot more work that can happen. There is a lot more work that can happen in this field to build sign language to document it. Like I was saying, it has been used for many years. Everybody has been living with the language, but it has just not been documented as the other languages are documented; spoken languages. But I think it is great work that has happened so far. Thank you for all the work that the panelists have put in. So over to you, Dr. Hemachandran if you have any questions.

Yes, it is not exactly a question, I am just amazed by the amount of work given the limited resources. Because regular dictionary projects have a huge scan base to scan different means of reaching societies, now huge computational power involved in reaching out to word archives, dispersed across societies, but nothing existed. For example, for Gopalakrishnan sir, this kind of project continues. But I just want to know what are the new modalities of imagination you are thinking now, now that deaf people are occupying new positions and they are slowly happening? Are you imagining new possibilities of building new dictionary projects that are and what are American examples and European examples for this? And how does our project differ, not by just terms of resources, but by way of test culture and so on. So that is my curiosity.

So, America actually leads in this field, they have very good resources. They have a Gallaudet University over there, which has different types of subjects, different kinds of people working over there and so many resources in use. So, there they are making their websites and creating mobile apps using all the unique high tech available over there. We do not have that kind of resources here in India. So here, technology is not used much in Indian sign language for example.

It has been documented and a lot of people are using sign language but not much technology is used. So people use technology a lot, so we need to use it for all these types of projects.

So, if you work on creating a dictionary as such we need to have the proper word and meaning of that particular word to make it a proper dictionary. So in India, we do not have this type of online resource. Previously Signex started these projects, but now they stopped. So, if anybody would like to be on sign language resources then we are ready to help out.

We assure you we can have resources like YouTube or we can have or we can create mobile apps, so all the contents can be provided by us. We can have this mobile app or online resources made by you people.

Shafique here. In addition to what Rahul said, we have to focus on the basics first about education, about deaf education. We need to have teachers using proper sign language even though the teachers are not qualified to teach deaf children. So what happens is the deaf children lose around 90% of what is being taught. And later on when they learn sign language when they have these kinds of resources, it is pretty late in life that they learn these things. So, what I would suggest is we have to have resources to sign language sources for deaf children first. So, the government is willing to fund a lot of technological projects. So the most important thing is we have to have proper accessibility through sign languages. We have a lot of resources; our people use YouTube and all that and we had lots of videos on YouTube, but we do not have many mobile apps. Hearing people have a lot of apps like for dictionaries A to Z, they can normally search for any kind of word.

So, we do not have a proper mobile app for Indian sign language, so we are hoping to create one in the future. There is still more work to be done, loads and loads of work in forming the dictionary or documenting ISL if I may say so. So, I know somebody had asked that question from the participants a couple of days ago as well.

How is it that we will ensure that any new signs that are being invented or new signs that come up are documented, captured and documented? Do we have a system currently? Some kind of broad scanning.

Yeah, Rahul here. So when a new sign is invented, you are asking how can we document it, right? So there you have a sign language expert, probably a linguist who has completed his sign language course. So you need to share this newly invented sign with these kinds of people, then see if the people actually can use this sign and if they are able to use it and if it is used more. So if 80% to 90% people actually use the sign then you can document that. We should not document any signs invented immediately, so we will have to do a lot of work to analyze it and then document it.

So right now, we do not have any particular centre, probably ISLRTC can take it. We have a group of deaf people working over there. So, like any sign has been invented it will then get it properly validated, get feedback and analyse and then get documented. Are there any challenges because we know there are discussions about standardizing sign language?

And that is what is mentioned in the National Education Policy saying that Indian sign language will have to be standardized to be able to enable the usage in schools or in colleges across India. So can you tell us about what work is happening on that side? And what challenges posed?

Shafique here. So, standardization is okay, so deaf people really do not trust in standardization; wherever this type of work has been taken up by the government or hearing people. So deaf people, deaf community, we do not know that we really want to have any kind of standardization, we really do not think about that. So, we are able to manage this, we are able to understand each other. So, we have different cultures in different places. So different cultures and different traditions you know in Kerala they have different cultures. They use dosa and all that appam, they tell you we do not have those kinds of dishes.

And in the south for the word what they sign like and in the north for the same word what we have a different type of sign. So, it was very difficult to select a particular sign to standardize.

So, there are a lot of arguments that we go through for standardization and so that we will have politics and arguments or so we go for private standardization. So maybe let us see in future what happens.

So once we know the sign language that will augment in the future when deaf children want to use sign language, maybe they have their own local integrated signs and then there are sign stuff from online resources, probably they might start using signs on online resources and all that. So like I said, in schools the teachers when they use sign language they need to start using sign language which has been documented.

For example when we say the word for potato, so how to write in the United States, there are certain things like that. So it would be difficult to standardize that. But I am not sure what is going to happen, so let us see in the future. But what I want to say is sign language is used by the deaf. It is a very beautiful language. Standardization is good, probably can be used in schools and all that. But we should not change the variations that exist in the deaf community.

So when you talk about sign language, when you see the grammar of Indian sign language in the different places, the grammar is the same; it is only the vocabulary which differs that even the vocabulary does not differ so much, like overall it is mutually connected. When people from different places in India communicate, they are able to communicate independently. It is not like we have no idea what the other person is saying at all, just a few words or few signs, which they might not understand. We actually asked them all the questionnaires of the sign and probably mug up in a week or two, they are able to significantly communicate, etc. So, I stay in North India, so I use signs, usually North Indian. When I go to South India, some of the signs are very different in terms of colours and things like that. So initially, I had a few issues, but actually by a week or so I was able to slightly engage with them. So, when I went back to North India, I just shifted over to my sign that I have learned normally. So, it is not an issue with us, so not difficult at all.

In addition, hearing people, how, you have around 130 crore people, the population of India. When you think the language has to be standardized for each and every person that is impossible,

right. So the government has to respect each and every language, and even in the Constitution all these languages are being documented. So, we cannot say that we have to have a standardized language at all, but in sign language, we have variations and all that. So 80-85% have the same perspective, 20% are different. Whatever the sign, it is very easy to understand. It is not an issue for us.

Yeah, I understand sir the problem with standardization, but is there a notion of categorization happening in the documentation project, for example I am imagining bringing words from different disciplines like regular English. In English for example much of the vocabulary from sciences, even my discipline literature, we borrow mostly from America and Europe, so lots of words trickle down or fly by airplane and come here. So we have that importing culture. So when it comes to disciplines, do you have that happening in sign language also? And second when I am thinking of categorization, I am also imagining something like slang and youth culture for example, and that is happening so rapidly even in English, I am catching up with that because I am a teacher. So what is happening on that front? How do we scan that in documenting sign language? In other words, this is a categorization question, not standardization.

I do not know how to explain slang. I do not know how we say that in sign language. Let us take for example, the slang babe or baby? Okay, I will try to explain it to them and maybe you can get the question as part of that. So babe actually refers to a beautiful girl who really looks good, so you use the term babe to refer to her right. So if somebody calls a girl babe, she knows that she is really good looking, not to be in a regular formal environment. But actually the term is baby. So babe is actually slang. So if you are actually signing and when you want to sound very stylish, do you have any such slang like that when you sign?

So, slang. So, we do not have some signs. So Shafique is actually giving an example for looking at a girl and saying she is really looking good, an example for the babe that we gave. So what he is saying is there are lots of boys standing and there is a girl passing and then she looks at me and the kind of feeling I had, the way he show it in sign is that also is a slang, jump for joy, so there is a slang, but actually this is the way you show it. And then you can also show the person is truly happy 24 hours after dreaming about that girl. So, there are certain signs that we can use

that can also be called slang. We use very visual actions and gestures which means what you really do when you are happy or when you are over the top of the world, so you know such things. So, for example when a person wants to make fun of a guy, for example make fun of Rahul, so Rahul has a sign name, right. So, the sign name could be Rahul, so a person can exaggerate it and make fun of him and exaggerate the sign that could also be considered as a slang. My circle some people have names like Pavan. So, you know Pavan means air, so we people also make fun of his name, sign differently.

So this actually brings back the point that Shafique was also saying yesterday that sign language like any other language does not have words for some, what should I say lexicon of other languages. Say for example, there are some words in English which you do not have exact signs for and the corollary is also true. So, you have a lot of signs for which you find it very difficult to say it in words in a spoken language.

That is true of almost all translations from one language. Correct. It can never be straightforward. Right, okay. Should I then look at some questions which; yes or still; yeah, okay. So, there were some questions which we did not get from participants from earlier on. So here is a question from Harnoor Kaur. She says, as a signer uses English as the basic language to understand sign language.

Can we go with the sign language in another language other than English? I think I will take that question because of the multicultural, multilingual India that we are, so do we have different signs or sign languages for different spoken languages? I do not know if that is the question that you meant? Right Nita, what she is asked, what she thinks is when signing it should be in English and sign, so that does not happen actually. Really, it does not matter which language a person is wanting to use sign language, really do not think in any language just think in sign language. Right?

So, I think I will just answer that. They do not think in a language or spoken language in their head, but they sign and signing is what will be going on in their head as well. For sign language, visuals are going in their head when they are signing, so they do not depend on a spoken

language unless there is a deaf person who has grown up with the spoken language as their first language through use of assistive technologies and therapies.

They probably do think of a different language in their head. Or even both. Yes. Definitely on visuals. What Dr. Hem was saying is not only in the spoken language or visually, but it could be both. Because I tend to think in English and Tamil together, being bilingual for a very long time. Yes. So, it could be possible for deaf people too I think. I do not think they saw it, yeah. For a deaf person, he does a spoken language skill, it is completely sign language it is meant. So Shafique says that if a deaf person signs for a deaf person it is completely visual; we need to use whatever information it gains is completely visual through the eyes. So that is translated in true sign language. So it is all objects, iconic objects which are in the head. So, he does not think in terms of words. It takes the terms of objects and images. So that is how they think and it is associated with clips and so they do not have any English or any other language in their head.

So, Rahul here. So when I was growing up, when I was in school, I never used to concentrate on languages. I always used to sign. So, when the teacher gives a word for example home, the word home is written in English I have no idea what it means. But I actually know what a home is and I know what it means, but I do not understand the word. So first the teacher will sign home and then I can write it with the particular word later on. So that is all I actually do, third spoken language. So, I first normally do the image. So, I always used to pick sign language. Yeah, okay.

Now here is a question from Nimisha. She asked do facial expressions also contribute to the language? Does the variation in facial expression with the same signs denote different meanings? So could we probably give an example? Okay, Shafique here. I can give you a very easy example for hearing people say the word happy, when we want to sign or when we want to show that we are happy okay. So, you can use very happy to show that the person is really very happy and you also change the way you say it, the intonation and everything, you change it so that it is also not exciting. Similarly, in sign language also if you have this particular facial expression, it is just normal happiness. So, if you sign it with a lower facial expression, it means that you are very, very happy. So hope you understood.

So the first way, the first this. There are three different ways of expressing happiness. So, if it is a normal expression, see for example sign for good, if you have a very normal expression, it might not really be positive, it might feel negative. Then also for the word line. So if you have more facial expression then it means there is what you call, maybe cheating or; no it is line, so with a change in facial expression, you know the meaning of, so the degree of, degree correct. The degree of the comparison you have right. Good, very best and all that certain type of degree of comparison that actually a degree, we do not know, someone has something like. In addition to that particular sign, each of them has different facial expressions, for word help.

So, help; if you want I can help you or do you need any help? So, the first is just a statement, the second is a question. So, with different facial expressions, the whole context also changes. So it is very important in sign language, its facial expression is very important in sign language. Great. And just I mean curious things.

So Gopalakrishnan sir says that when you have a sign language class, the trainer has to be the deaf person because the hearing trainer cannot get the proper expressions. So, it is very important that it should be a deaf trainer so that all the expressions and the body language and everything is clearly understood. For example, for the word freedom just signing the particular word with your hands is not enough, you need that particular facial expression also according to the context.

So, it is better to have a deaf instructor who can really teach the different nuances of language plus sign language rather than a hearing instructor. So, we do not recommend a hearing instructor. So, for teaching hearing children sign language, you can actually use an interpreter along with the deaf instructor to sign language so that is my advice.

Is mask being a hindrance here in the scheme of things facial expression is so important, is mask being a hindrance there this Corona time? Yeah. Yeah, Rahul here. You know like when I try to communicate with a person whom I know already and if he wears a mask that clearly does not matter much. So, I know what type of expression he uses, what he is habituated to, how he uses the expression.



So when he wears a mask, I can easily understand what he might use. But if it is a first whom I am meeting for the first time and he wears a mask, then very difficult for me to understand because I am not used to the expressions that he uses and we have to stand some distance apart, remove the mask and then communicate, so we cannot stand close to each other wearing the mask and communicate. So that would be easy, but for a person whom I know already and whom I am familiar with that is much easier. Shafique here. You know I see some of the hearing people using their phones and they come on the microphone, using that cloth to change the way they speak. If somebody covers the mouthpiece with a cloth, will he be able to understand? So when using the phone if you cover the mouthpiece with a cloth, it is very difficult to know who, I do not know who is actually on the other side. So similarly, if you have the mask then it is very difficult to understand the signs clearly.

Okay. We have another question. This is from Gitanjali. She also asks how can one sensitize peers in a mainstream classroom towards accommodating their deaf classmates? So when you have a mainstream class when a deaf child comes into a regular classroom, communication is very difficult. So if the hearing peers are taught a bit of sign language and some of the basic things, how they have to communicate with a deaf person. For example, you have to have your eye gaze at the person when we speak to him things like that. So, when that has been taught and when a deaf person actually comes into a mainstream class, then he might be able to communicate, probably you might, you are very slim for the children that do not have the courage to order.

It is not the right thing to do because when a deaf child comes into a classroom, the whole nature, the whole environment as a hearing environment, people, other children talk to each other very freely. So when a deaf student comes into a classroom like that he might not feel much confident, his self-esteem might be low sometimes because he is not able to freely communicate or not get the attention of his peers.

So if you have an equal number of deaf and hearing children in the classroom, then it is fine. The hearing children can look at all the deaf children signing and they can try and communicate. So even for the teacher you need an interpreter and that the methodology of teaching a hearing child

and a deaf child is a bit different. So for a hearing teacher teaching a hearing child that is completely different from a teacher teaching a deaf child. So my view is if you have an equal number of deaf and hearing children in a classroom that might work out, but just for a single deaf child in a mixing class is not advisable. So, I just like to add here from my experience working as an educator in the rural areas, right. So, through some of our projects we work there and we ensure that and it is all in mainstream setups because in rural areas the places we work we do not have deaf schools there.

So there is in the most probable cases just one deaf child in that school. So, there are peer sensitization sessions where we talk about what deafness means for that level of understanding of children and also teach sign language and not just for that hearing group but involving the deaf child as well. So, it is all an activity that is done together. So, the children really enjoy learning sign language because they find it very interesting. And they also know that there is somebody very different from them in their classroom and they would like to communicate and talk. It definitely does happen that not everybody becomes friends, the deaf child will find his or her own group of friends, but everybody knowing that this is a deaf child and these are the special needs and this is the language that is to be used for communication really helps a lot.

So, it is not only the classroom or the class that the child is studying in but the entire school and using platforms like morning assemblies to also integrate the deaf child to ensure that communication is there for the deaf child also to participate fully in the assemblies. So, these are some of the things that we can do to ensure that in mainstream schools and in classrooms deaf children can be integrated.

We have a special guest whom we would like to introduce to all of you. He is Mr. Zamir who is deafblind. Okay, so Rahul is going to help Mr. Zamir come on screen. Welcome Zamir, it is so nice to see you. Zamir is deafblind and so you can see Rahul sitting next to him holding Zamir's hand and signing at the same time. So, what Zamir does is understand what is being spoken through the tactile sign language, which we spoke about on the first day and second day. So, you see it happening here in life.

So can I request Zamir to introduce yourself and tell us about FEDB which is the society for the empowerment of deafblind. Yes, Zamir Dhale, this is my sign name and I am a deafblind person and I am the founder of the society of empowerment of persons with blindness. Yeah, so this is wonderful. This is the first time such a society is formed in India. So in India, we have a lot of deafblind people.

So, they also use tactile and sign language to communicate. We also have technical devices like a Braille display unit which we can get used to communicating using smartphones. I can show you my Braille display unit. So, this is my Braille display unit. So that is how I make it. So, I get messages on my phone. So, it connects to my Braille display unit and the messages are converted to Braille. So, it is connected via Bluetooth. I can also use my palm when connected to my Braille device and I can inscribe and communicate, write letters, read emails, send leave notes, and data. I can do a lot of things that way. I also read a lot of news items every day. And I have also given my examinations, so all these I do through the Braille device. Great, thank you Zamir.

So, this is a workshop on sign language and the beauty of sign language and how sign language is used by deaf people. So, is it an Indian sign language or American sign language class? He is asking. Okay. Rahul is stating that it is an Indian sign language workshop where we are sharing a lot of information about Indian sign language. So could you share with us Zamir how important sign language is for communication for you?

And also maybe notes on tactile sign language, I mean what does that mean? Yeah. So, we can use any type of sign language, we can use Indian sign language and American sign language also as a deafblind person does not understand Indian sign language, had to use American sign language better to understand. And it is easy for us to use American sign language because it uses one language alphabet, one language manual alphabet that is much easier.

So how sign language is important for him and for other deaf blind people? And what is tactile sign language? And how does it work? Okay, when we use the tactile sign language, I can understand the sign on the hand and I can feel it through my hand and go to my Braille and I can understand what the sign is. And he said yes for deaf blind people sign language is necessary.

It is very important because for us to communicate we have our own expressions, our own thoughts. For example, we cannot see others and we cannot see objects. So when we use tactile sign language as a way of communication, that is the way that opens up the world for us. Great. So just a little while ago, we were talking about how important expressions are on the face for sign language.

So how do you feel different words or different meanings without expressions on the face? How can you communicate it through the tactile touch, is there a way? So, we can create the expression using the hands, you know like a person is angry or like if he has a valid facial expression then I can feel it with my hands with the Braille signs. So you have special tapping techniques or gripping or holding, would it be that way?

Sometimes if the person is very happy, the way he taps, I can understand the person is happy. So if the person taps in a very soft manner, then it means that okay I am actually not convenient with him and that he is not happy. So I can understand through the way he touches Absolutely great. I mean, thank you so much. So exciting to see so many different ways of communication and expression.

Even speaking beyond tactile sign language Nita, actually I can very well connect to it because all of us can distinguish between a warm shake and a cold one and a busy one and indifferent one, don't we? So, I think it is organic that tactile sign language also evolved from that organicity of touch. That is what was my loud thought about it, I mean just relating from everyday life. Correct? Yeah.

Okay, so I will just take one last question, maybe it is related to higher education and the scientific terms and all that that is being used in higher education. How was that being managed? Words like quantum theory or deconstruction or postmodernism that kind of stuff. Yeah, so Rahul is saying that we do not have signs for so many of those kinds of terms. We need to create a corpus for all of that. We need to also find out from teachers of different schools or colleges as to how they are explaining such terms or using these terms to teach deaf people.

So that kind of information also needs to be collected and this is some work that is still yet to happen in the future and that is work in progress. And it is not an easy one, but yes work in progress. Okay. So, the Zamir is saying that it is to be added to the dictionary later on. Right. So, I have a very interesting question also from a lot of people that I got questions from is what do we do after learning alphabets, manual alphabet?

What is the next step for us? And where can we learn if we want to learn more sign language? Okay, so Rahul is saying that just learning the alphabet is definitely not equivalent to doing sign language. So, you need to first know what you want to learn sign language for, is it just for communication with someone you know or is it for teaching purposes.

So if you know that if you want to teach, then I think it will be better for you to learn a professional course which is offered by the ISLRTC in various centres across India or if you want to become an interpreter, you take a similar route. But if it is for general communication, there are many NGOs offering courses online for you to learn and there are online resources as well.

There is just one more question. It says how you raise your volume when you speak? How do you say that in sign language? So yeah, Gopalakrishnan says it is all in your expression and your body movement of how you use your signs, whether you do it slowly or with great intensity that is how you identify. Great.