

Deaf Musicality and Unearthing the Translation Process

Jason Listman, Summer Crider Loeffler, and Rosa Lee Timm

INTRODUCTION

Deaf people and how they see, feel, experience, connect with, and interpret music varies so much. It is not simple, but complex. There are many reasons for that, but one big reason may be how society looks at the word 'music' and that sound is a must. Then they look at the word, 'deaf' and how it means to not be able to hear sounds, so the two words contradict each other.

ROLE OF CONTRIBUTORS

There are three contributors to this article, and all of us have had different journeys and have different backgrounds, but we all cherish the Deaf community and we love music. We've noticed that the Deaf community's reaction to music is divided. Some are resistant to it and some love it. When it comes to how to translate music, the methods are varied. There are some who nitpick over translations that are perceived as heavily influenced by the English language, or other reasons. In reality, there is no 'right' way. The deaf music translation process is unique and we are still figuring it out. The three of us have been observing the process and taking notes on what seems to work. We have taken into consideration that different deaf people have different backgrounds, cultural influences, language skills, hearing abilities, and individual preferences for how to translate music. Based on our observations, we set up a framework that we feel confident about and hope it will encourage more deaf people to be involved with music.

PURPOSES

The goal here is for us to present a discussion of different topics. We will discuss our observations of the Deaf community's tendencies when translating music. We will discuss history and how it impacted us, how it influenced how we translate and create music. Also, we will discuss why we feel music needs to be part of deaf people, why they should take ownership and create more music translations.

I'm Summer and I will be explaining the history that influenced and shaped the translation process. Jason will be explaining what we've noticed with the framework for the translation process and how there is a range, from literal, word-for-word translations, to translations where modifications were made for ASL, to more loose, creative translations. Rosa Lee will explain the process that Deaf people tend to follow while doing a translation. Hopefully understanding the framework that we've put together will encourage the community to be more involved and create more translations.

Now I will discuss Deaf music history. How history influences how we translate music depends on what you consider deaf music. It seems there are two types of music that are more commonly associated with deaf music: translation songs and percussion

songs. Now, for the question of where and when it started; in 1902 a group of Deaf Americans decided they wanted to show their patriotism, that they are a part of the nationalism movement. So, they did a translation of the ‘Star Spangled Banner,’ which became the first record of a translated song. A translation of the song, ‘Yankee Doodle’ was also filmed around the same time. This is when they started getting into filming and playing with the camera.

Charles Krauel, in the 1930s, decided to take it a step further and get more creative, doing percussion songs with the crowd. Many different percussion songs were created during this time and that seems to be when percussion signing came into the picture. Fast forward to the 1950s and 1960s, when more and more performing groups were formed. One example is Musign, who did translated songs with deaf experiences added to them. Later on, more deaf comedians were included, more deaf bands were formed. We also got performance groups, touring groups such as Rathskellar, Wild Zappers, and more.

Now, in the last ten, fifteen years we’ve seen more and more performances doing a mix of translations, percussion signs, and new genres. Now we’ve noticed a trend with YouTube and social media videos and platforms—hearing ASL students who also love music, creating videos of themselves signing. It has become a common occurrence. There are channels, take D-PAN for example, where deaf people make vlogs and create content to post online. We have ‘Dancing with the Stars,’ Sean Forbes, concerts where CDIs with interpreters get onstage and sign the music, musical performances such as ‘Big River,’ ‘Spring Awakening,’ and more where they use a lot of signed translations. History has had an influence on us and now we need to think about how deaf people can take these songs, sounds, videos and translate them the Deaf way.

TRANSLATIONS

With translations, people think translating is synonymous to interpreting, but it is not. To interpret means taking a message in one language and passing it on in another language simultaneously. The message is being processed immediately. With a translation, it means the person is reading a text in one language and thoroughly thinking about how to best present it in another language. They take into consideration the following; word placement, emotions and feelings behind the text, culture, and how to convey that message in the translation. With a translation, feedback can be gathered and revisions made until it is complete. That is what a translation is.

Online, there are many deaf performers signing songs and releasing them on the Internet, for the audience’s enjoyment. You may have noticed that some of the translations are done entirely in ASL while some follow the English version more closely, and some are a mix of both. There are so many different approaches and some prefer the ASL approach and others prefer the English or the mixed approach. Our preferences vary so much because the deaf people in the audience’s experiences with music are all so different.

I'm going to give you a different framework for translations. One person named Larson, who researched, studied, and put together a theory focused on translations, which he called 'Continuum of Translations'. I will show you what it looks like. As you see on the continuum, on this end is 'literal,' next to it is 'modified literal,' next is 'idiomatic,' and then on the other end you have 'unduly free.' I will explain what each of these mean and help you get an idea of what each translation style looks like.

I chose a song called 'Fireworks,' sung by Katy Perry, and looked online at different performers' translation of one line in the song. I will break down the line and provide an explanation of what it means. The line from the song is, "Do you ever feel like a plastic bag drifting through the wind wanting to start again?" See that line? I have several different performers signing that line, and what I will do is copy the performers' signs and how they did the translation, and explain where their translation fits into the continuum. This should help give you a better understanding.

I will start with 'literal' and what it means. Basically, a literal translation is when I look at each of the words on paper and think of the word's equivalent in signs and sign it exactly like that. There are no thoughts put into the meaning behind the words or line. If there is a hidden message, I do not clarify the hidden message. With literal translations, when songs have metaphors or hidden messages, it is not shown; there is no focus on the meaning behind the line. Rather, the focus is on form—how it is signed and that's it. Some performers put emphasis on the rhythm, following the sound and how sound is passed on through sign. One example is the word, 'somebody.' Some performers will sign 'some' and 'body' separately, not as one word. Another example is 'unfortunately,' which some performers will break up into three signs, 'un-fortunate-ly.' This follows the sound rhythm of the music. This is a literal translation. Some performers will omit English words like are, an, a, was from the lyrics, but still follow the English word order. That is also a literal translation.

Now that I've explained literal translations, I will give you an example of one. "*Do you ever feel like a plastic bag drifting through the wind wanting to start again?*" Do you see how that translation follows the English word order exactly? There was no concept, no visual impact, it was so literal and given in exact English, without any clarifications of meanings or hidden messages. That is a literal translation.

Now, I will move onto the next model of translation on the continuum, 'modified literal.' It means that English and ASL are mixed together. The translator will look at the English text and decide if they want to follow the form. Some translators will follow the form, but apply the ASL meaning to the words. Some switch around the words to follow the ASL order and still keep the English form. Others will follow the ASL word order and add some clarification on the messages and meaning. Modified literal translations can vary, depending on the translators' goals. Some translators may include classifiers and facial expressions, but the meaning will not be clear, the message will still be hidden. Some translators will mouth the English words while some will use ASL mouth movements. That is modified literal translation.

I will be giving you two examples. The first example will be a translation of my own, and for the second example I will be copying a person named Sherry Hicks' translation. With these two examples, you will be able to get an idea of a modified literal translation.

“Do you ever feel like a plastic bag drifting through the wind wanting to start again?” Now that you just saw my translation, can you see the difference between literal and modified literal translation? Because with this one, I followed the English word order, but I added classifiers and clarified the concept, the meaning behind it. The goal is for the audience to see my signing and interpret for themselves what it means. For example, when I signed ‘bag, drifting away,’ what did that mean? I don’t tell the audience. Through this experience, the audience is allowed to interpret the meaning for themselves. This translation fits under ‘modified literal.’

For the second example, a translation done by Sherry Hicks and signed by myself. *“Do you ever feel like a plastic bag drifting, feeling like you’re tumbling and blowing through the wind wanting to start again?”* See how Sherry Hicks followed the English word order, and she fingerspelled ‘plastic bag’? However, after “plastic bag” she added a description in ASL, “feel-like tumbling and blowing.” THAT gives you the meaning behind the message, in clear ASL! She kept the form when she said, “feel like plastic bag,” but by adding the descriptive sign, she made it a modified literal translation.

Now, on to idiomatic translations, which means taking English text and translating it into ASL, following ASL word order, ASL mouth movements, and facial expressions. The meaning behind the English text is still an important part, but instead of following the text, the focus is more on revealing the hidden messages through ASL and the meaning is clear to the audience.

This example is a translation by Kriston Pumphrey, which I will demonstrate. *“Have you ever felt depressed, lost, confused, and dreamed about starting again?”* As you can see from his translation, he does not follow English word order at all; instead he focuses on expressing the meaning behind this line in ASL. This is a fitting example of an idiomatic translation. When Kriston signs *““Have you ever felt depressed, lost, confused,”* he does not mention the plastic bag at all. His translation shows us the hidden message, unlike the previous examples, which followed a more literal translation. They follow the form of the original text, while Kriston’s translation does not, and instead focuses on the ASL form.

Now, I’m going to discuss the last model of translation on the continuum, ‘unduly free.’ It means that the English text of the song is translated into ASL, with the performer’s own style and creativity influencing and altering the meaning behind the song. The song’s true meaning is dropped, and the performer has artistic license, or the right to modify the song and make it into their own song, as inspired by the original song. That is the ‘unduly free’ translation approach.

Tiffany Hill created this example, “*(searching) Question, happened feel lonely, wandering, instincts gone!*” Through her translation, you can clearly see her personality, perspectives, and experiences in her interpretation of the song. I feel this fits the unduly free approach. Some of you may argue that this takes more of an idiomatic approach, but if you look at how she moves her body to the rhythm of her song, it does not match the rhythm of the original song. Because of this difference, it means this is Tiffany’s own music, her own way of expressing the song. So, I feel this falls under the unduly free approach.

After I’ve explained the four different translation approaches, along with the examples, I hope you have a better understanding of the approaches. I would like to emphasize that the examples I’ve chosen for each approach may not be the most perfect examples. I would like to clarify that when working with the continuum, nothing is black and white; translations do not have to perfectly match the criteria for the translation models. There are varying ranges between each model that a translation may fit into. If you look at an entire translation, line by line, you may notice that the first line is more literal, then the next line is more idiomatic, and another line is unduly free. It doesn’t stay the same, depending on the song and the translator’s goal. A song will not be entirely idiomatic, but rather it will change from one line to another, as decided by the translator.

The goal of the translator is important too, and they need to consider their audience. If it’s for deaf people who enjoy music or for deaf people who have never heard music before, the translator will have to figure out how to modify their approach to best accommodate their audience. For a perfect translation, the goal is to land on the middle of the continuum, so that both types of audiences will be drawn in.

Now, Rosa Lee will discuss in depth the process for a deaf translator and the important steps they will need to take during the translation process. It is important to study the concept of the deaf translation process, a new concept, which has never been researched before.

MUSICALITY

Did you know that musicality is an important part of the song translation process? What does musicality mean? Think about this, if you’re watching someone signing a story, you know that it isn’t a song. Someone’s signing a poem, a beautiful form of art, but you still know it isn’t a song. With a song translation, you see dancing, percussion beats, and more, and you know immediately that it is music. How do you know that? It has rhythm and it has texture, the different layers of sound. It also has tone—it can be loud, quiet, slow, fast, and have facial expressions, these cues immediately tell you that it is music.

Imagine you’re a song translator and you’re standing onstage watching hearing musicians perform with vocals and instruments. Most of the time, they will start off by playing just their instruments, no singing for some time. You’re standing there until they finally start singing. What do you do during that time? For the hearing audience, the minute they hear the music, they immediately recognize the flow of the music, the genre,

and the music will either connect them to a memory or a favorite genre, such as hip hop, pop, rap, country music, heavy metal, and many more.

Those familiar with the genre of the music that is playing will know the history of that music, and will know that the music itself is telling a story through the instruments' beats and sounds. This stirs up and stimulates their feelings, journeys they've been on, memories, or anything that happened that is a part of the human experience, and continues to build up everything until the singing finally begins. From there on, everything they're feeling will be on the same wavelength as the song and the music, up until it ends and the audience member is able to absorb it all and be inspired. That is the music experience.

How can a deaf person experience the same thing with music? Of course, by doing their homework and studying the song genre, what time period it's from—the '80s, '90s' or the 2000s' and what the singer's own history, their own story is, the meaning behind the lyrics in the song. This is the body of their work and the musicians internalize it all and then it goes into their music, their performance. As a translator, in the beginning when they are playing without any lyrics, I am able to envision their purpose.

For to give you an example, I've chosen a song from the '80s that is about going out and having a good time. The energy of the song is very upbeat, so I follow that and increase my energy to match the song, and I'm ready to go. I imagine large hoop earrings rocking back and forth on my ears as I strut to my car. I get into the car, put one hand on the wheel, turn the key in the ignition, the music blasts from the speakers, and I move with the beat as I drive.

The deaf audience will pick up on this, feel as if they're there in this scene; bring back memories of their own. They will remember a similar experience back in their youth, such as turning the key in the ignition—which we don't really have anymore, hoop earrings, and everything about the '80s. I could even elaborate and add on the big hair. By setting the scene and showing the feeling behind the music, when the musicians finally start singing the lyrics, the deaf members of the audience will be able to ride the wavelength right alongside the song. Once the song ends, they will be able to take it all in and be inspired too. Their musical experience will be the same as a hearing person's.

In a song translation, the lyrics can show musicality. I will show you my technique that I use. For an example, I will be using the song, "Baby, Can I Hold You Tonight?" by Tracy Chapman. I watched her sing, studied her facial expressions, the words, and I noticed that she tended to put in a beat between lines. This had an important impact on the meaning behind the song, that changed how it was interpreted and I needed to show this in my translation. This was not shown through words, but through musicality.

So, as I was figuring out how to show this, I thought about using my eyes. For instance, when I signed "Sorry" I lowered my eyes down at my hand on my chest, and then raised them. The eye movement was the beat. When a deaf person sees the eye

movement, they know it means the focus is on the word, “sorry.” It shows that the apology is not sincere and that there is an attitude behind the apology. That experience carries over to the next line and makes it even more powerful because of the attitude behind it and the insincerity of the apology. Another word this beat and eye movement was used with was the word “forgive.” As I signed “forgive,” I did a side eye towards my hands, which showed insincerity towards the word too. The downward eye movement and the side eye is a technique I use to show the musicality of the song.

I want to show you will help with how to recognize the difference between a chorus and a verse, using an example from the song, “I Can’t Help Falling in Love With You” by UB40. I used shoulder movements in between words during the chorus, so I would sign the verses and once I started doing the shoulder movement, the audience knew I was at the chorus. That experience of repetition, predictability, and the attitude behind the movement helped create a connection to the experience of the song itself, which was being shown through the music.

Now is a great time to grab the opportunity to study the works of different deaf artists, their techniques, and how they show musicality. Some of you may have noticed artists using the technique of holding their hand up against their heart as they move with the beat, to show the rhythm. Some translators will show what the sound looks like through rhythmic hand movements while some others dance with the beat or use facial expressions. There are so many different techniques and we need to take the opportunity to study them all and take notes on why they picked that particular technique. Did that technique fit the purpose of the song, did it work or not? It needs to be studied so we can figure out what kind of musicality deaf artists and song translators should use.

HUMANITY

Deaf people go through life differently and how they perceive, feel, and express music are all different. How we play with language, how we include visual, tactile, dance or body movements, and technology is amazing. How we play with sound, silence, rhythm, words, pictures, and more is boundless. We want to see more deaf people in the spotlight and more role models, more deaf people making contributions, create more job opportunities for deaf musicians. We want to see more deaf people give concerts, more CDIs onstage, and just overall more involvement, especially in the diverse, universal music cultures. The deaf community can offer a different way that humans experience and express music.

REFERENCES

- .1994. Charles Krauel: A Profile of a Deaf Filmmaker. Videocassette. San Diego, CA: DawnPictures
- Bahan, B. (2006). Face-to-face tradition in the American deaf community: Dynamics of the teller, the tale, and the audience. In H-D.L. Bauman., J.L. Nelson, & H.M. Rose (Eds.), *Signing the body Poetic Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, (pp. 21-49). Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Bienvenu, M. J. (1984). A Road Being Built.... *The Reflector*, 9, 28-33.
- Esther, D., & Mikkel S. E., Hermansen, E. T., Perry, K., & Wilhelm, S. J. (2010). *Firework* [Recorded by Katy Perry]. On *Teenage Dream* [CD]. Los Angeles, CA: Capitol Records.
- Hicks, S. [Sherry Hicks]. (2013, March 2). ASL-Katy Perry's "Firework" (HI Def). Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/k7KKHx--Ok4>
- Hill, T. H. [Tiffany.T.hill]. (2010, December 10). Katy Perry "Firework" (ASL). Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/nByWHdu1pXY>
- Larson, M. L. (1984). *Meaning-based translation: A guide to cross-language equivalence*. Lanham: University press of America.
- Listman, J. [Jason Listman]. (2011, January 23). *Firework- katy perry (in ASL with lyrics)*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/eOEdqV5iRcY>
- Loeffler, S. (2014). *DEAF MUSIC: Embodying language and rhythm*. In H-D.L. Bauman., & J.J. Murray. (Eds.), *Deaf gain: Raising the stakes for human diversity* (pp. 436-456). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Peters, C. (2000). *Deaf American literature: From carnival to the canon*. Gallaudet University Press.
- Pumphrey, K. [Kriston Pumphrey]. (2014, September 24). *Firework *ASL**. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/ccMCgOncxmg>
- Timm, Rosa L. [Rosa Lee Timm]. (2017, August 25). *Baby, Can I Hold You* by Tracy Chapman

(ASL). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/137329641>

Timm, Rosa L. [Rosa Lee Timm]. (2013, January 28). ASL Music Video: Can't Help Falling in

Love by UB40. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/GybudZAAStM>

ONLINE IMAGE REFERENCES

BIG RIVER [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from https://i2.wp.com/www.theaterscene.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/bigriver2_1086899946.jpg?resize=460%2C412

DPAN [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from <http://sheenamcfeely.com/dpan-logo/>

DWTS [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from https://s.abcnews.com/images/Entertainment/abc_dancing_stars_nyle_dimarco_jc_160322_16x9_992.jpg

MATT MAXEY [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from https://img.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeed-static/static/2017-08/25/16/asset/buzzfeed-prod-fastlane-01/sub-buzz-23065-1503693926-4.jpg?crop=1596:1064;0,0&downsize=1040:*&output-format=auto&output-quality=auto

MUSIGN [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from <http://thesilentnetwork.tv/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/0071.jpg>

RATHSKELLAR [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from <https://www.facebook.com/34944961810/photos/a.10151274757721811.438547.34944961810/10151345381276811/?type=3&theater>

SEAN FORBES [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from http://www.houstondeafnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/tdomf/27287/89ad17_3ed0e2f1b0334aa6abb85bc2c31007b7_jpg_srz_p_979_501_75_22_0_50_1_20_0.jpg

SPRING AWAKENING [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from <http://csunshinetoday.csun.edu/wp-content/uploads/martha3.jpg>

WILD ZAPPERS [Online image]. Retrieved December 20, 2018 from <http://invisiblehands.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/scan3c.jpg>