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**Author:** Susan Modiegi Njeyiyana

# Awareness fosters respect for Deaf cultural identity in SA

*Highlighting Deaf Awareness Month and the issues in media representation and education*

## COMMENT

SUSAN (MODIEGI) NJEYIYANA



DEAF Awareness Month, observed in September, has become a traditional celebration locally and worldwide, passed down through generations and celebrated annually.

Traditions help create a sense of pride, continuity, community and shared identity.

In recent years, our sign languages and Deaf culture have been celebrated during the International Day of the Deaf on the last Sunday in September. It is a meaningful tradition that raises awareness, fosters inclusion, and strengthens our community locally and globally.

For this year's Deaf Awareness Month and International Day of the Deaf yesterday, I would like to focus on two issues, namely, how journalists use terms to represent a deaf person and the treatment of Deaf children in schools for the deaf.

### Terms for deaf persons

In many ways, we see or hear what and how they write. Newspapers, social media, television news, and social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) often use terms like "hearing impairment" to represent someone who is profoundly deaf, uses sign language, grew up in a school for deaf persons and identifying as part of a linguistic minority.

Journalists should use "Deaf" with a capital "D" to represent individuals as part of the Deaf culture and community.

Conversely, "deaf" with a lowercase "d" should be used to describe those who are oral deaf or hard of hearing, do not know sign language, or are not part of the Deaf community.

The term "person with hearing loss" is a broad term that includes anyone who has a reduction in their ability to hear, ranging from mild to profound hearing loss. Some individuals

may choose to call themselves "hearing impaired". So, journalists need to ask a person what they want to be called and how they identify.

The misconception is that all deaf individuals use sign language as their primary or first language.

However, this is not always the case. Some deaf individuals, especially those who are oral deaf or hard of hearing, may primarily use spoken language and may not know sign language at all. Their first language could be the spoken language they were taught, such as English, Zulu or Afrikaans.

In other words, not every deaf person grows up using sign language as their main form of communication. This varies based on individual circumstances such as upbringing, education, and personal choices. Different types of hearing loss do not automatically determine a person's first language or identity, as this is often influenced by parental desires.

Children who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or oral deaf may feel frustrated by pity and want to be included in activities, while parents, having faced enough judgment, may feel embarrassed and hurt and may distance themselves from extended family and parts of society, despite some acceptance.

Every deaf person can choose their identity. For example, an oral deaf person who chooses to learn to speak and can hear well with the help of a cochlear implant (a small electronic device that helps people hear sounds) may be part of the hearing world.

They can learn sign language later in life and be welcomed into the Deaf community, but their identity may remain distinct. The identity of the Deaf community is rooted in sign language and Deaf culture, which are inherent to the Deaf experience.

### Sign Language interpreters

Journalists should never describe South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreters as deaf individuals. This is a common misunderstanding.

The SASL interpreters are hearing individuals trained to become professional interpreters, like interpreters of spoken languages. In the future, journalists should be careful to represent Deaf or deaf individuals correctly and avoid using negative and insensitive terms like "mute" or "deaf and



THERE is a misconception that all deaf individuals use sign language as their primary or first language. Not every deaf person grows up using sign language as their main form of communication, says the writer. | Independent Newspaper Archives

dumb", as deaf people have a voice.

### Schools for the Deaf

History repeats itself in Schools for the Deaf when it comes to our identity.

I see many Deaf children confused about their identity when they communicate with hearing teachers who use Signed Exact English, Signed Exact Zulu, or Signed Exact Afrikaans.

This combination of spoken and sign languages, talking and signing at the same time, does not fully adhere to the grammatical rules and structure of a natural sign language and is not a proper language.

Deaf children often feel "pushed to adapt" to using Signed Exact English for hearing teachers to communicate and use voice, which is strange because we were told to use it to accommodate the hearing. Nevertheless, at the end of the school day, Deaf children communicate in their natural language and culture within their group, laughing, making fun, or teasing like any hearing peer and finding their identity through interactions with their Deaf peers.

We communicate differently between Deaf and hearing individuals because of the history of Deaf education. We, Deaf people, have permanently adapted to using Signed Exact English only when we communicate with hearing individuals.

Since they are not mainstream schools, I wonder why Schools for the Deaf introduce speech therapy. This can lead to feelings of confusion and experiences of discrimination. South African Sign Language is officially recognised as the 12th language of the country. If an oral deaf or hard of hearing person chooses to go for speech therapy, they should be suitable for a mainstream school.

However, it is unacceptable if the school undermines SASL and continues to disrespect deaf children and infringe on their constitutional rights.

Deaf children can learn any spoken language and SASL, but not necessarily learn to speak in spoken language, which does not make sense. They can excel in reading and writing. This situation is similar to clauses 4 and 5 of the Bela (Basic Education Laws Amendment) Act, which require vigilance.

The broader society needs to be aware of the impact on people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or oral deaf. We often adapt to them. They should respect us by also adapting to us when they communicate with us. Adapting is not difficult.

*Njeyiyana is a junior lecturer and South African Sign Language co-ordinator in the Department of General Linguistics at Stellenbosch University.*