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Representaciones Sociales en la construcción de la identidad del intérprete de Lengua de Señas Mexicana en el ámbito educativo

Social Representations in the construction of Mexican Sign Language Interpreter Identity in the Educational context

Representações sociais na construção da identidade do intérprete de língua gestual mexicana no campo educaciona

Jessica Rascón Castillo
Universidad Pedagógica Nacional del Estado de Chihuahua, México
jrascon@upnech.edu.mx
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1153-3078

Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Universidad Pedagógica Nacional del Estado de Chihuahua, México
fponce@upnech.edu.mx
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3689-9893

Resumen

A pesar del rol clave del intérprete de lengua de señas mexicana (LSM) en la inclusión educativa de personas Sordas, su profesión permanece subestimada e invisibilizada. El propósito busca comprender la relación entre las representaciones sociales y la configuración de la identidad profesional del intérprete, desde una perspectiva teórica. En la metodología se realiza una revisión documental, sin embargo, el acceso a la información fue limitado por la naturaleza del tema. La revisión evidenció que las representaciones sociales predominantes reducen al intérprete a un rol de facilitador técnico, y como consecuencia no se reconoce la complejidad de su labor. Esta visión fragmentada desconoce las competencias lingüísticas, culturales y formativas requeridas como factores que obstaculizan el pleno reconocimiento profesional. La construcción de una identidad profesional para el intérprete de LSM es fundamental para transformar las representaciones sociales que invisibilizan al intérprete, y

a su vez fortalece su reconocimiento en el contexto educativo y garantizar condiciones laborales dignas que favorezcan esta profesión.

Palabras clave: Educación, identidad, lengua de señas, representación social.

Abstract

Despite the key role of the Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreter in the educational inclusion of Deaf individuals, the profession remains underestimated and rendered invisible. The purpose seeks to understand the relationship between social representations and the configuration of the interpreter's professional identity from a theoretical perspective. The methodology involves a documentary review; however, access to information was limited due to the nature of the topic. The review revealed that prevailing social representations reduce the interpreter to a technical facilitator role, and as a consequence, the complexity of their work is not recognized. This fragmented view overlooks the required linguistic, cultural, and educational competencies as factors that hinder full professional recognition. The construction of a professional identity for the LSM interpreter is essential to transform the social representations that render the interpreter invisible; at the same time, it strengthens their recognition within the educational context and ensures dignified working conditions that support this profession.

Keywords: Education, identity, sign language, social representation.

Resumo

Apesar do papel fundamental dos intérpretes de Língua de Sinais Mexicana (LSM) na inclusão educacional de pessoas surdas, sua profissão permanece subestimada e invisível. Este estudo visa compreender a relação entre as representações sociais e a configuração da identidade profissional do intérprete a partir de uma perspectiva teórica. A metodologia envolveu uma revisão documental; contudo, o acesso à informação foi limitado pela natureza do tema. A revisão revelou que as representações sociais predominantes reduzem o intérprete ao papel de facilitador técnico, consequentemente deixando de reconhecer a complexidade de seu trabalho. Essa visão fragmentada negligencia as competências linguísticas, culturais e educacionais necessárias, fatores que dificultam o pleno reconhecimento profissional. Construir uma identidade profissional para intérpretes de LSM é fundamental para transformar as representações sociais que os tornam invisíveis e, por sua vez, fortalecer seu

reconhecimento no contexto educacional e garantir condições de trabalho dignas que apoiem essa profissão.

Palavras-chave: Educação, identidade, língua de sinais, representação social.

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Introduction

In the educational field, the presence of a Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreter has been a necessary response to the demand for the inclusion of Deaf people at the higher education level [1]. However, far from being recognized as a professional specializing in the linguistic mastery of the language, culture, and all the elements necessary for their role, it is essential to acknowledge the role of LSM in the education of Deaf people. Therefore, an interpreter with comprehensive training is required, encompassing not only mastery of the language but also knowledge of the cultural, pedagogical, and emotional aspects necessary to function effectively in academic contexts. Consequently, the lack of professional recognition for interpreters is directly linked to deficient education for Deaf people. Vidal et al. (2009) point out that:

> Undoubtedly, there is a poor education for Deaf children in our country, with notable problems such as denying them access to education for the simple reason of not communicating with them in their own language and doing everything possible to take away their identity as Deaf people, to cure their deafness, and our eagerness to turn them into hearing, Spanish-speaking children, with aggressive rehabilitation techniques and strategies, practices that are completely deviated from current pedagogical principles. (p. 11)

The authors' findings highlight a troubling reality for Deaf children: the denial of their linguistic and cultural identity through the imposition of Spanish and methods that violate their rights. In response, the authors propose incorporating sign language interpreters at all educational levels. However, their role is often misinterpreted and reduced to that of a companion or facilitator, without a clear definition of their functions within the classroom and the institution.

[1]The term Deaf will be used throughout the document to refer to people who identify culturally and linguistically as part of the Deaf Community, not only from an audiological condition.

This fragmented view of the interpreter's role fails to recognize the responsibility inherent in their work and reveals a lack of understanding of their role in educational processes. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), in Article 9, establishes the need to "provide forms of human or animal assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate access to buildings and other facilities open to the public." This article redefines accessibility as an essential condition for people with disabilities to live adequately in their environment, requiring States to make the necessary adjustments and adaptations to guarantee equality of opportunity.

In the educational field, the role of the interpreter is an emerging function, as it guarantees equitable access to education. However, the interpreter's presence is often conditioned by the social representation of the educational space in which they operate, which places them in a position disconnected from their professional work. Uría and Ferreira (2017) refer to this as follows:

> Focusing on classroom interpretation services, the role of the sign language interpreter has been gaining increasing importance in the educational field for Deaf students. Their function in this context is not simply to transmit the information presented to the student; this adaptation depends on the student's linguistic, academic, developmental, and psychological situation. (p. 267)

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the interpreter's role in the classroom extends beyond a purely instrumental function; however, the prevailing social perceptions surrounding their work tend to reduce it to a mechanical or secondary task. These perceptions directly influence how they are perceived within the educational environment, affecting both their professional status and their working and training conditions.

In this context, exploring the concept of social representations is fundamental. Moscovici (1979) points out that these "correspond, on the one hand, to the symbolic substance involved in their elaboration and, on the other hand, to the practice that produces said substance" (p. 22). From this perspective, the representations constructed around the figure of the sign language interpreter not only reflect shared beliefs but also institutional practices. Thus, this study is situated within a field that articulates the educational, the linguistic, and the sociocultural, with the purpose of strengthening theoretical frameworks that promote a more just and equitable inclusion.

Aim

Understanding the relationship between social representations and the configuration of the professional identity of the interpreter, from a theoretical perspective.

Methodology

The methodology involved a literature review to gather and synthesize relevant information related to the research topic. This process entailed searching for, selecting, and critically analyzing bibliographic sources such as books, scientific articles, theses, and publications in digital scientific journals. Subsequently, the data were organized and systematized, allowing for the identification of trends, knowledge gaps, and relevant contributions. Source selection criteria included documents that addressed, from a theoretical or empirical perspective, the categories of social representations, professional identity, and interpretation in sign language within educational contexts. Furthermore, the fundamental classic texts contained within the theoretical framework, especially those related to the theory of social representations, served as the basis for triangulating the results with the theory. Sources lacking academic rigor or with limited thematic relevance were excluded, prioritizing those that allowed for the articulation of the educational, linguistic, and sociocultural approaches underpinning this research.

The search was conducted in academic databases and specialized repositories, including Redalyc, Dialnet, Google Scholar, university databases, and institutional websites of national and international organizations. Because the study of the LSM interpreter as an identity subject has been little explored, the number of specific documents found was limited; however, approximately 15 to 25 relevant sources were analyzed, allowing for the construction of the theoretical and contextual framework of the study. This review revealed gaps in the scientific production specifically focused on the professional identity of the LSM interpreter, which reaffirms the relevance and necessity of this research.

Results

Traditionally, studies on sign language have focused on the Deaf community and the construction of its identity. This research, from a sociocultural and linguistic perspective, also recognizes sign language as a central axis of belonging. However, it proposes to focus on an essential figure in educational inclusion processes that has been little explored from an identity perspective: the sign language interpreter.

Beyond simply viewing it as a linguistic bridge, this study aims to analyze how the professional identity of interpreters is shaped by the inherent tensions of their professional role, the social representations that influence their work, and their intermediary position between two cultural worlds. This perspective broadens our understanding of the inclusive ecosystem and allows us to see the symbolic processes that influence the interpreter's practice and recognition as a subject with their own identity. This relates to the implication that interpreters possess a specific profile and set of skills, as Burad (2009) points out:

> First, communicative competence encompasses linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and cultural competence. These are the skills to be developed by anyone who aspires to be bilingual and bicultural. Then, building on this foundation, one could work on translational competence and ethical competence, as specific skills for interpretation. The coordinated integration of these axes would guarantee basic professional competence. (p. 2)

Although sign language interpreter training encompasses the development of complex communicative, translational, and ethical competencies, a reductionist view persists that conceives of the interpreter solely as a transmitter of messages. This functionalist perspective ignores the fact that the interpreter is an individual shaped by values, beliefs, and experiences that constitute their professional and personal identity. By omitting this dimension, their role as a social actor is diluted, and the fact that all interpretation is mediated by subjective, ethical, and cultural decisions is overlooked. Recognizing the interpreter as an individual with their own identity, and not as a neutral conduit, is key to revaluing their impact in educational contexts, where their intervention directly affects the inclusion and development of Deaf students.

Identity construction takes on special relevance in inclusive education, as both the Deaf community and interpreters have historically been marginalized. In the case of Deaf people, their identity has been undermined by medicalizing approaches that have denied the cultural

and linguistic value of sign language and promoted normalization practices. Similarly, interpreters, despite their fundamental role in guaranteeing access to information and equitable participation, have been relegated to a technical and invisible function, without recognizing the identity dimension inherent in their work as intercultural and linguistic mediators. Reclaiming the identity of both groups is not only an act of justice, but also necessary for building inclusive educational environments where linguistic and cultural diversity is perceived not as a barrier, but as a value. According to Papin (2020):

> Thus, the process of identification allows us to embrace an identity and appropriate it. While identity often functions as a banner that marks the contours of the political subject, identification is relegated to the intimate sphere. However, the process of identification involves a bricolage and a rearrangement of the multiple identities that construct individual identity. This construction relies on an extremely significant awareness, as it allows us to reconsider our experiences and fit new pieces into a personal narrative while highlighting what does not fit within the limits of identity. (p. 146)

In this sense, although identity has been extensively studied in relation to the Deaf community, this research focuses on the interpreter profession. Social recognition is key to the consolidation of their identity; however, it is a profession that does not exist within the educational system, both socially and in terms of their identification as professionals with a specific linguistic and cultural function. Many interpreters construct their role from personal experience, but without institutional support that grants them legitimacy, which hinders the consolidation of a solid professional identity.

The professional identity of sign language interpreters is not formed in isolation, but rather constructed and transformed through interaction with teachers, administrators, and students. The social representations these actors hold about their role, often limited to a technical or paternalistic view, influence how the interpreters themselves perceive and perform their work. Thus, external expectations can strengthen their professional identity or generate tensions regarding what truly constitutes an ethical and situated practice. In this educational context, the interpreter's role can become fragmented, blurred, or delegitimized. As Cruz (2016) mentioned regarding:

> One of the biggest problems sign language interpreters face is that if it's already difficult for people to understand how to work with an interpreter, it's even more so when that person doesn't speak and only uses gestures. The minimum requirements

> for a sign language interpreter are: good visibility so they can sign and be seen by Deaf people, as well as well-paid work, because currently sign language interpreters earn much less than interpreters of spoken languages. (p. 27)

Therefore, the problems faced by sign language interpreters are not limited to precarious working conditions or a lack of understanding of their work, but reflect a deeper, symbolic exclusion. Because they are not considered equal to spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters are relegated to a subordinate social category. Thus, the social structure relegates sign language interpreters to an ambiguous position, as they are neither recognized nor made visible.

Therefore, understanding these social representations and their relationship to strengthening professional practice and ensuring full participation in education is key to understanding the processes of this identification. According to the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, this recognition requires that:

> A first step towards normalization is the recognition, by the university community, of sign languages as languages with full rights and of great cultural value. In this way, the implementation of new degree programs or the incorporation of new pathways into current curricula will be perceived as an unavoidable necessity. The greater presence of sign language will, in turn, facilitate the recruitment of Deaf, Deafblind, and hearing sign language users who currently have few educational options related to their language. (p. 12).

The institutional recognition of sign language as a complete language, just as complex as spoken languages within this university setting, not only represents progress in terms of inclusion for the Deaf, Deafblind, and hearing sign-using community, but also has a direct impact on the identity construction of sign language interpreters, as Van Dijk (1998) mentions:

> In other words, a collection of people constitutes a group if and only if, as a collective, they share social representations. For individual members of the group, this means that part of their personal identity is now associated with a social identity, that is, self-representation as members of a social group. (p. 182).

According to this theory, belonging to a valued social group fosters a positive social identity. Therefore, when sign language is normalized and incorporated into the university curriculum, interpreters cease to be peripheral figures and become central actors in an academic and cultural project. This increased visibility not only improves their training and working

conditions but also strengthens the cohesion of the group and contributes to its consolidation as a group with its own identity, recognized and respected within the university system.

Now, how is an interpreter trained and what skills are required to perform this function? According to Papin and González-Montesinos (2023):

> For all the people interviewed, the choice of the ILS profession stems from a desire to support the Deaf community that has been developing since childhood. While it is true that other hearing people, when interacting with Deaf individuals, may end up acting as intermediaries, what defines the CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) experience is having grown up and developed this role and this concern for ensuring that information is conveyed correctly. Even when professional interpreters are available, CODAs continue to intervene for their parents because they remain the people who can best understand their Deaf family member and, because they are present in their daily lives, can handle unexpected interactions. (p. 172)

Discussion

This reflection on the training of sign language interpreters through interactions with Deaf family or friends reveals a profoundly human and cultural dimension to this profession. Most interpreters come from a CODA (Community of Deaf People) background; they don't choose this profession as an option, but rather as a decision stemming from lived experience and a personal commitment to the Deaf community. This role of interpreter within the family solidifies over time, and they eventually become professionals in the field of interpreting, not only as a means of work, but as an extension of their identity.

However, this identification as a CODA (Cooperative of Deaf People) is linked to the personal aspect; however, when there is no contact with a family member, training occurs through social interactions (friendships) with Deaf people. Therefore, it is important to recognize this profession, where they are interconnected. According to Muñoz and Herreros (2018), they state that:

> According to the information provided by the participants, it has been determined that the training as sign language interpreters, both of the Chilean interpreter and the Colombian interpreter, presents similar characteristics, since both began to learn signs as a result of their relationship with a Deaf person, then expanded their command of

> the language by relating to the Deaf community, later carried out training courses taught by an educational institution with official recognition, and finally have continued to perfect their work by relating to Deaf people who are studying at a higher level (p. 164).

From this initial training, often involuntary and fostered by the context, it is necessary to consider a series of skills to adequately perform the role of interpreter. López-Burgos and González-Montesinos (2024) point out that translation or interpretation into Spanish Sign Language (LSE) in the artistic field requires specific sub-competencies. Among these, bilingual competence stands out, which implies mastery and fluency in LSE, as well as the appropriate use of classifiers, space, and role. Extralinguistic competence is also essential, linked to knowledge of the Deaf community, art, and its cultural expression. Finally, psychophysiological components play a relevant role, such as poetic sensitivity, musical ear, and body and facial expressiveness.

While this approach focuses on artistic contexts, these skills are also fundamental in academia, where neologisms, technical terms, and specialized content are encountered. The interpreter must be proficient in both languages, understand complex concepts, and adapt them to sign language using resources such as classifiers, spatial awareness, and role-playing. Furthermore, knowledge of Deaf culture and various disciplines is required to convey messages accurately. All of this entails significant physical and cognitive strain, especially when suitable conditions for interpreting are not present.

Precisely because of this situation, it is complex to situate the identity and function of the interpreter within the classroom and educational institutions, apart from other responsibilities and activities, to which Sánchez and Benítez (2009) refer that:

> Recognizing Spanish Sign Language (LSE) as the language of the Deaf community implies the need to readjust existing resources by incorporating into the regular infrastructure figures that were previously nonexistent or no longer included in the staff: - Sign Language Interpreters (SLI). - Deaf Advisor. To this we would add a third figure as a consequence of the implementation of the higher-level vocational training cycle, as a Vocational Training Specialist in "Sign Language Interpretation" qualification: teachers specialized in the Deaf community and specifically for instruction in sign language from the different multidimensional perspectives required by a communication model that is more explanatory than descriptive (p. 277).

This situation, where identity is a key factor and the interpreter's role in the classroom is a reflection of the inherent complexity of their function, which extends beyond linguistic mediation. In accordance with the aforementioned authors, recognizing language itself implies recognizing the work of the interpreter, who performs an educational function from multidimensional perspectives. This scenario compels us to reflect on the knowledge and attitudes an interpreter must possess in this context. These are not limited to linguistic competence but extend to encompass a deeper understanding of the community, the university program they are working in, mediating language and culture, and facilitating communication with administrators, staff, and faculty.

The discourse surrounding the figure of the interpreter, stemming from the existing social representation of them, presents a challenge that requires transforming the traditional view of the interpreter as a passive figure, limited to being merely a bridge between two languages. This social representation must evolve toward the understanding that this professional is an active agent in inclusive education. This implies that the interpreter is perceived as an instrument, as Barrero (2015) points out:

> It has been said that sign language interpretation arises from the communicative needs of Deaf people. This is the somewhat diplomatic assumption that has become most widespread among interpreters and Deaf people. However, this assumption is extremely vague. It leads us to suggest that interpretation is something given rather than constructed. This assumption tends to obscure an important component of the emergence of this profession: the pre-existence of bilingual sign language-Spanish speakers. Interpretation, rather than being driven by inherent needs in all human beings, is possible due to a specific experience. (p. 309)

A debatable proposal by the previous author, regarding the nature of sign language interpretation and its origin, although it is true that in many contexts interpretation has been assumed based on the communicative needs of Deaf people, it is also important to consider that saying "something given" seems to simplify a much more complex reality than what interpreters experience.

Conclusions

Through a literature review of various studies focused on the identity of the sign language interpreter, a consensus is evident regarding the identity of the interpreter as a process of constant construction, traversed by multiple contextual, relational and symbolic factors.

Furthermore, sign language interpretation as a profession faces a complex and challenging reality, marked by working conditions that are often disadvantageous and lack full recognition. Despite their effort and dedication, interpreters find themselves trapped in a scenario where the university context can be exhausting.

The role of the Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreter in university education, while crucial for creating an inclusive environment, continues to be viewed as a secondary or technical task, without adequate recognition of its complexity and responsibilities. This lack of visibility and professionalization not only affects the social standing of interpreters but also limits the quality of education received by Deaf students.

It is necessary to recognize the work of the interpreter as a specialized profession, which requires rigorous training, not only in the language, but also in the culture of the educational context, recognizing their role not only as a linguistic mediator, but also as fundamental intercultural agents in the educational process.

Raising the profile and professionalizing the role of LSM interpreters not only benefits the interpreters themselves, but also the entire university community by fostering greater awareness and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. Beyond simply recognizing and strengthening the role of LSM interpreters, it is a fundamental step towards inclusive education that respects the identity of this community.

Furthermore, future lines of research are proposed based on the findings identified in this review. Several areas of interest emerge that warrant exploration in subsequent research, as their scope exceeds the objectives initially planned for this study. Regarding the training and professionalization of Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreters, it is necessary to investigate current training models for LSM interpreters in the university context. This includes training programs that integrate pedagogical, intercultural, and professional identity aspects, as well as an evaluation of their impact on service quality; the construction of professional identity in specific contexts such as the university, considering variables such as years of experience, type of educational institution, and the dynamics among deaf students,

faculty, and administrative staff; and working conditions, since the identified precariousness requires studies that document the working conditions, workloads, remuneration, and support received by LSM interpreters.

These lines of research will allow us to delve deeper into emerging aspects of this study, which will contribute to strengthening the profession and advancing towards a truly inclusive higher education that respects linguistic and cultural diversity.

Future lines of research

The analysis presented in this research identifies a primary line of future research that could focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of comprehensive training models for Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreters in the university setting. It is pertinent to investigate the significance of current training programs and their relationship to pedagogical, intercultural, and professional identity development dimensions, as well as to analyze their impact on the quality of interpretation and the academic experience of Deaf students. This type of analysis would allow for comparative studies among different higher education institutions, identifying best practices, training gaps, and innovative curricular proposals that respond to the real demands of the educational context.

The same findings identify a second line of research that could delve deeper into the construction of the interpreter's professional identity in specific university settings, considering factors such as career path, the type of institution within the Mexican education system, the disciplinary area in which they work, and their relational dynamics with Deaf students, faculty, and administrative staff. From a qualitative perspective, this research offers opportunities to explore the interpreter's role over time, its inherent tensions, and the influence of their social representations within the academic community.

Finally, another line of research focuses on the systematic analysis of working conditions and their impact on the professional performance and well-being of Mexican Sign Language (LSM) interpreters. This involves analyzing workload, remuneration, contract stability, institutional support, and physical strain; aspects that would help to highlight the structural problems faced by the profession.

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Contribution Role	Authors
Conceptualization	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo, Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez (same)
Methodology	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Software	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Validation	Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Formal Analysis	Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Investigation	Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Resources	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Data curation	Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Writing - Preparing the original draft	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Writing - Reviewing and Editing	Dr. Fernando Israel Ponce Ramírez
Display	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Supervision	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Project Management	Ms. Jessica Rascón Castillo
Acquisition of funds	NOT APPLICABLE