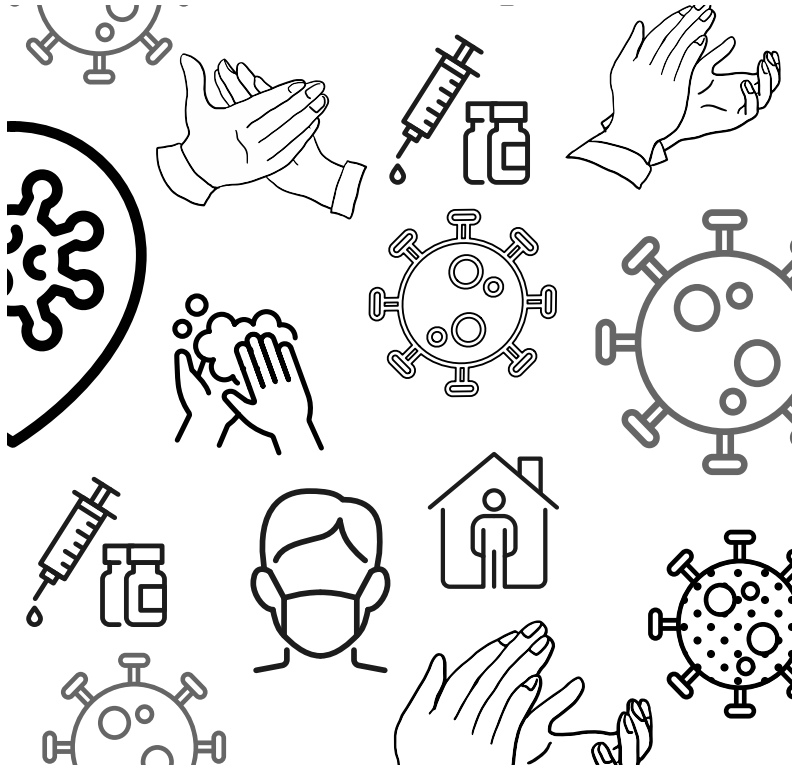


Let me tell you how frustrating this pandemic has been for deaf people

Dr Dai O'Brien



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It would be a brave person who tried to argue that the UK government, over the past several years, hadn't shown a kind of systemic ableism in its attitudes towards and policies dealing with disabled people.

This ableism is reflected in wider societal and media-based discourses in the UK. Over the past few months in particular, the government's dealings with deaf citizens and the media coverage of deaf people and British Sign Language (BSL) during the coronavirus pandemic has again shown this entrenched ableism and caused immense frustration and anger.

Media exposure for deaf communities in lockdown was either patronising or missing altogether, compared to the celebratory tone taken to promote people such as Tom Moore's feat of endurance, or Ed Jackson's climbing the equivalent of Everest on his stairs. Instead, most coverage was either about how easy it would be to learn BSL as a hobby during lockdown, or stories emphasising how isolated some deaf people could become.

While isolation of deaf people, particularly children who live with people who cannot sign, is a real problem, many of these stories showed a lack of respect for or awareness of BSL as a natural language with associated cultures, communities and histories. This reduced BSL to no more than a communication "tool" or a novelty to keep people entertained during lockdown.

It might also be said that the new face mask guidance shows the government's low opinion of deaf people. The most recent guidance states that masks are not required if you are "travelling with, or providing assistance to, someone who relies on lip reading to communicate", which suggests that the government thinks all deaf people leave

their home with a carer who manages their communication for them. Better guidance would centre on the agency of deaf people and suggest ways to navigate these communicative environments ourselves, rather than relying on the kindness of strangers to communicate.

This also ignores the facts of the spread of disease. By removing masks and shouting so that deaf people can "hear" you, you're increasing the likelihood of passing any infection you might have onto the deaf person you intend to "help". Using BSL, gesture or even voice recognition apps on your mobile phone (something deaf people have been doing for years) is much safer and minimises the risk of infection.

Similarly, no deaf person with a social media account will have escaped being tagged in a story or post about "transparent masks" in the last few weeks. Of course, this ignores the fact that it is not us deaf people who need to wear see-through masks, but rather hearing, non-signing people who we might have to lipread while out and about.

It's striking that now, at the very point that all those hours people have presumably spent learning BSL in lockdown might finally come in useful, BSL is still considered a hobby not fit for use in the real world.

Where were the interpreters?

This patronising attitude to deaf people and BSL takes on a nastier tone in the refusal of the UK government to provide BSL interpreters for their daily coronavirus briefings. All the devolved administrations provided their own BSL interpreters, who were in the room during briefings. The physical presence in the room meant that the interpreter would feature in all footage, whichever channel subsequently screened it. This ensured that information given in English (or in Welsh) was accessible for deaf people on whichever platform or channel they chose.

In England, however, the Westminster government delegated responsibility for providing BSL interpretation to the BBC, which only provided in-vision interpreters on the BBC News channel, and only at certain times. This meant that access was only in place for deaf people whose preferred language is BSL if they watched the briefing live, on that specific channel. Any footage used in later news bulletins would not be interpreted.

This lack of access sparked a campaign with the hashtag #whereistheinterpreter, started by deaf activist Lynn Stewart-Taylor. And that, in turn, culminated in legal action being taken against the government for discrimination against deaf people whose first or preferred language is BSL.

BSL is a separate language from English, with its own grammar and structure. Many deaf people have been failed by the education system in the UK, resulting in a persistent achievement gap between deaf and hearing pupils, particularly in English. This can be traced back to at least the 1970s, when the first and so far only national test of deaf children's outcomes was conducted by psychologist Reuben Conrad. Subtitles therefore do not provide the necessary access to the more than 87,000 deaf people whose first or preferred language is BSL).

In these times of altered social norms, surely we should be rethinking our relationships with other cultures, communities and languages.

Everyone can benefit from thinking creatively about what they might learn from other language practices. When it comes to deaf communities, that's particularly true while masks obscure what many hearing people take for granted, but which can be expressed equally, if differently, through BSL. Maybe it's time to drop the ableist attitudes towards BSL and deaf people, and see what the rest of our society can learn from them.



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I am a senior lecturer in BSL and Deaf Studies and am also the Programme Lead for BSL degrees in York St John. I am the module director for several modules, including Sociolinguistics of BSL, Deaf History, Deaf Cultures, Deaf Visual Experience and Deaf Social Theory.

I teach on several of the BSL modules, which means I support BSL students all the way from their very beginnings in the language all the way through to a level of conversational proficiency. I also lead seminar groups for the Language and Society first year module.

After studying Biological Sciences at undergraduate level, I took an MSc in Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol's Centre for Deaf Studies. After taking some time out to travel and work in the NHS, I returned to academia to take an MRes in Sociology in the University of Bristol and then a PhD in the School for Policy Studies in the same university. My current research focus is on how deaf people navigate through social spaces which are not designed for them, and how deaf people and communities create their own social spaces to resist imposed expectations and norms.

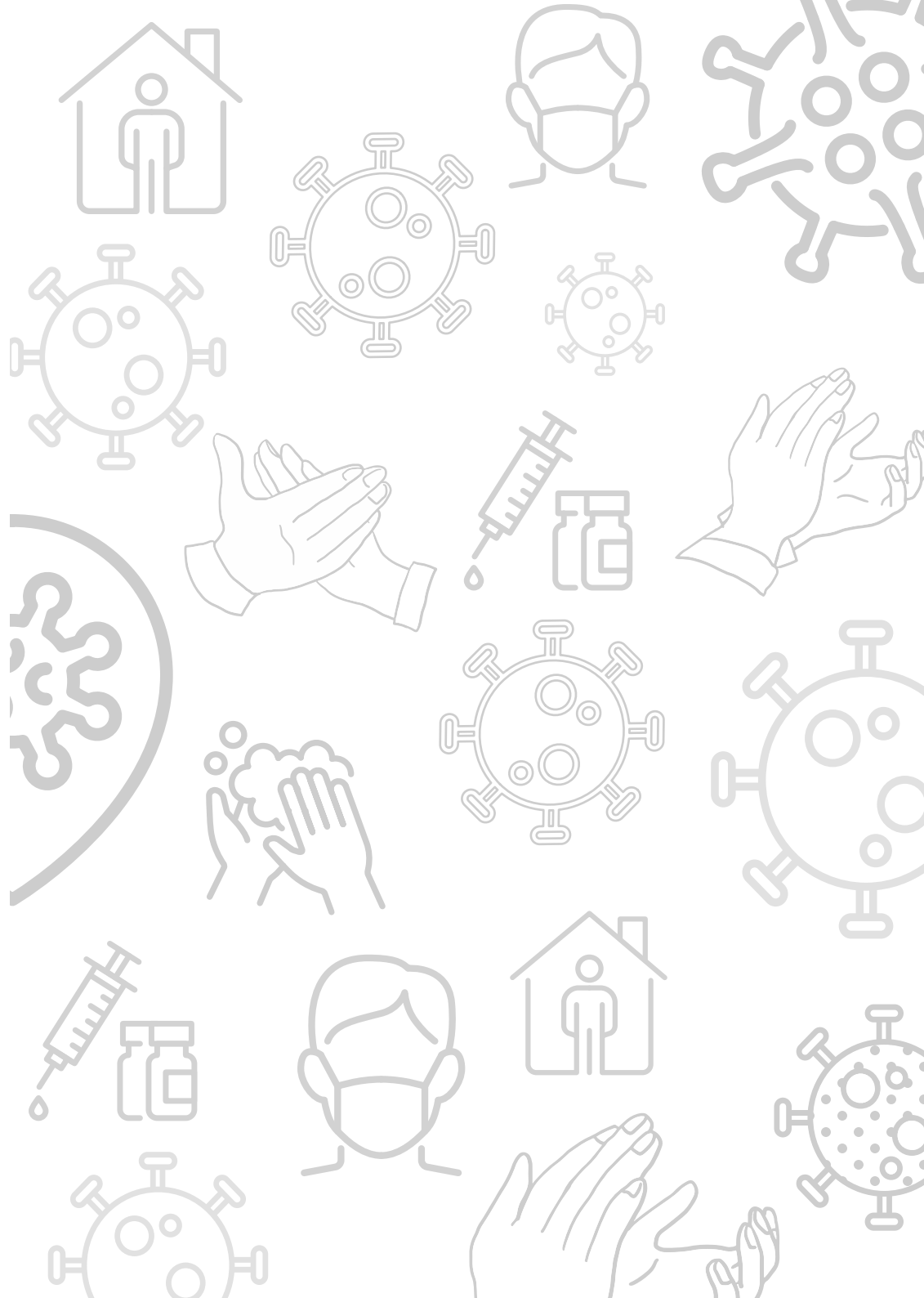
Find out more about our research activity and the degree courses we offer on our website.

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For more information about languages and linguistics research at York St John University, please see our website: www.yorks.j.ac.uk or follow us on Twitter

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