

Episode Transcript for 934.
Sign Language is
Fascinating 🖐️ ***(with***
Siobhan Dodd)



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[Luke]

Hello listeners, welcome back to Luke's English Podcast. How are you doing today? I hope you're doing fine.

It is a grey and rainy and wet day here in my part of the world. Horrible conditions, but actually perfect conditions for sitting here and recording another episode of this podcast for learners of English. And yes, that is the idea for this podcast, which you probably have realised by now.

The main aim here is to give you plenty of things to listen to, to help you do loads of listening in English. And I want to let you listen to a variety of things. Sometimes it's me talking on my own, sometimes it's me talking with guests.

It's very important that you listen to a range of different voices, different people, native speakers, non-native speakers, people using English. There's a big variety of English in the world. It's not just native speakers.

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You know, millions of people all around the world use English as the international language. So it's really important that you get to hear lots of different voices speaking English in their own way. The more you're exposed to, the better, I think.

And a variety of different topics as well. Hopefully I can cover various different things, different topics in these episodes. Today on the podcast, it's a conversation episode.

So you'll hear me in conversation with another guest. And today's guest is Siobhan Dodd. I first met Siobhan fairly recently actually when I was on her podcast.

She does a podcast with a friend of mine called Alex. The show is called Following Through. I talked about it a few episodes ago.

I mentioned that I'd been on the podcast and then there was that tangent about the phrasal verb to follow through and all the different meanings it has. So that's when I first met Siobhan when I was on her podcast. And I learned in that moment when I met her, I learned that she is a sign language interpreter, which I think is fascinating.

Sign language and a sign language interpreter. Do you know what sign language is? Sign language is that kind of visual language which has been invented to help, essentially to help deaf people communicate.

I think that's probably the way to put it. You know, I'm talking about people who are unable to hear. And so, you know, language,

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normal spoken language is not really something that they can use at all.

And so sign language has been invented to help those people. And I think sign language is fascinating. I love to see sign language in action. You know, it involves using all these different gestures, using the hands, right, to communicate very complicated things. You see simultaneous translations in sign language. You see that on TV sometimes.

Sometimes there'll be someone doing the signing, sign language on the screen. And sometimes you see it live if there's an event or something where there's someone doing the sign language simultaneously by the side of the stage. You just see people in public speaking in sign language to each other, like someone on the train, like you see a couple of people on the train.

It is fascinating to see the fluency with which people do the different signs, the complexity of it, and the expressions on people's faces as they are communicating with each other using sign language. So I think it's a fascinating thing. And I don't really know very much about it, to be honest.

I don't know about the system of sign language. I don't know how you learn it. I don't know how it works.

You know, I don't really know very much about it. So I'm very much looking forward to talking to Siobhan. And in fact, I'm recording this introduction just before the interview begins.

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The interview is scheduled to start in just a couple of minutes. So I'm just doing this quick introduction first. It's one of those introductions before the actual conversation.

So I'm very curious to talk to Siobhan all about the world of sign language, how you actually learn it, what the system of the language is like. Does it have grammar, for example? Do you conjugate verbs and things like that?

Are there tenses in sign language? How does it actually work? How do you talk about the past, the present, the future?

What about things like intonation and sarcasm? Is it possible to express something like sarcasm or contrastive stress? I've got loads of questions about it.

And hopefully you will be curious about sign language too. Essentially as a language learning podcast, although I don't always talk about language learning on this podcast, but this is a podcast for learning English. You know, we have a special interest in language and how languages work and language learning and communication.

So hopefully this will be an interesting way to explore the subject of language, but in a different mode today, the mode of sign language. So any questions you have about sign language, have a little think about them right now. How many different sign languages are there in the world?

Are there different accents in sign language? Or any other questions that you could think of, just hold them in your brain.

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Then you can perhaps try and search for answers to those questions.

All right then. So I'll now let you listen to the conversation, which I'm about to have. And here we go.

[Siobhan]

So a sign language interpreter is somebody who hears a language and they translate it into another language. So either there'll be like a hearing person who's, sorry, I tend to have, I've tendency to sign when I'm talking about signs. So you'll notice I do a lot of that, which is no good for the people listening, but great for the people watching.

So an interpreter, so I would, an interpreter hears English and they translate it into sign language, into BSL, which is what I do, which is British Sign Language. And similarly, if a deaf person is signing, I will translate it into English. So I will, it's what we call voiceover.

So we will voiceover what they're saying. And that's basically it. But it's not just that actually, we also do written translation as well.

So sometimes a deaf person will sign a load of stuff at me and I will write it up because it's really important that not a lot of people are aware of this, but English and BSL are so different that actually the level of English for a lot of deaf people is not quite to the same sort of level as hearing people, if that makes sense, because the grammar is so different and the expectation in the professional world is to have, you know, all your tenses perfect and to have a real formal professional level of English.

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So often as interpreters, we will take hearing English and just make it a bit more understandable, or we'll take sort of maybe just perfectly good English, but just make it a little bit more hearing, a little bit more corporate and professional. So that's, yeah, that's some things what an interpreter does.

[Luke]

Yeah. Okay. So I'm sure that listening to this, I do have interpreters as well.

I know that I do people who interpret, you know, from English to another language and back again. So it might be a similar experience. I mean, is it, do you think, is it, is it comparable?

[Siobhan]

Absolutely. Yeah. Like my postgraduate diploma was in interpreting and translation and we actually had to study some of the interpreting and translation texts for spoken languages.

Like your listeners probably be familiar with like Cecilia Wadnesko and Mona Baker and all these geeky translation linguists. Yeah. We had to study them because it is, it is the same principles.

And for some reason people think it's not when it comes to sign, they think that it's just literally word match sign. And that's not the case. And a lot of your listeners will be aware of this.

It's just translation and interpreting is so much more than that. There's so much processing and there's so many different layers and things to be aware of.

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[Luke]

Yeah. That is a common misconception about different languages. In fact, about translation or interpreting and also about language learning, that it's just a question of just replacing all the words, the individual words with the words from the other language and then Bob's your uncle, but there's a lot more to it than that.

Isn't there? So now I can ask you maybe why, so why did you become a sign language interpreter and also how, but first of all, why?

[Siobhan]

Why? Okay. Well, it started when I was 17.

I started learning sign because I was working part-time with kids with disabilities and I saw like some of the more autistic, Down syndrome, and they were using Makaton. I don't know if you've heard of Makaton. It's what Mr. Tumble uses in CBeebies. And it's what a lot of people use if you've got learning disabilities. So it's like a basic form of sign. It's not a language.

It's a communication system. And I was interested in this. So I thought, Oh, I'll learn BSL.

I'll book onto an evening course of BSL. So I did. And at the same time, I was also choosing my options for university.

Initially I wanted to be an actress, darling. So I applied for all these drama schools, didn't get in. And my mom was like, this isn't going very well, is it?

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Do you want to consider some more options? And I was like, Oh, if I must. And I found one course at the university of Reading that was theatre arts, education, and deaf studies.

Very niche. It's closed down now. It's that niche.

[Luke]

Theatre arts, education, and deaf studies.

[Siobhan]

Yeah. Yeah. The education was like one module.

We didn't do much on that, but it was basically creating theatre for deaf and hearing audiences. So I then did an evening class in BSL. I realised I liked it.

So picked this course, got into that course. And then from the age of 18, I was getting drunk with deaf people, basically. All the time.

[Luke]

Well, yeah, this is often the best way to learn a language, isn't it? You just get drunk with the people who use it. And yeah, it's like a fast track.

[Siobhan]

It really is. Honestly, the first night I got to university, I'm 18 years old. I've left my mummy and daddy for the first time.

And I'm sat in the kitchen in my halls of residence, and I'm the only hearing person. And I'm like, Oh, and I had a level one sign, which

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at the time, I thought I was fluent. But looking back now, I mean, God, even now I go, Oh God, can I do this?

I have crisis of confidence. But the more you know, the more you realise you don't know, right?

[Luke]

Yeah. So what's that like then hanging around with, you know, loads of deaf people? Great.

Yeah.

[Siobhan]

I mean, we don't leave the pub. Honestly, the deaf, so yeah, so I then carried on getting drunk with deaf people. And in my 20s, I would go to deaf pub a lot.

And it's hilarious because the pub landlord is like, it's time, we've got to go, last orders, and everyone's just chatting. And occasionally they turn the lights off, but you still find a way. And if they knew I was hearing, they'd be like, you've got to tell them, you've got to tell them, it's time.

So I would just pretend to be deaf as well. So none of us have to leave the pub.

[Luke]

That was great.

[Siobhan]

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Sorry, so the how, I'm very long winded. So yes, I went to university and got drunk with deaf people a lot. That was great.

But I didn't get, I didn't manage to get my level two because they cocked up the teaching. So I then went on to be a kid's entertainer and had to do like evening classes to get my proper sign language qualifications. Because after uni, all I had was getting drunk with deaf people experience, but not, I didn't actually have the next level up qualification to go and work with deaf people.

So eventually I got my level two, level three. Then I was working as a, they call it a communication support worker. So you're interpreting in colleges and schools and stuff like that.

And then you qualify. Then I did the postgraduate diploma and qualified as an interpreter in 2011.

[Luke]

Okay. What, how many different levels are there? Then you mentioned level one, level two.

[Siobhan]

Um, well, back then there was five, I think. So it used to be, they do level one, level two, NVQ three, and then they would do NVQ. Then they, then they went to NVQ six.

So for some reason, five doesn't exist. Don't know why. Um, NVQ six language and then NVQ six interpreting.

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But at this point I did the postgraduate. So I did a postgraduate certificate and then a postgraduate diploma. And it took me 10 years in total from level one to qualifying as interpreter.

It's hard work.

[Luke]

Yeah. How did you actually do it then? Obviously there's getting drunk with deaf people, which is going to, you know, just naturally lead to you practising a lot.

[Siobhan]

Yeah. That's the best bit.

[Luke]

That's the best bit. I suppose it's similar to learning any language. Um, what was your, what was your process then?

[Siobhan]

Well, uh, evening classes and, um, practising. So really the key for me was deaf friends, having really good deaf friends who helped me through it. Um, and occasionally you do the icky thing.

Like I hate doing this, but probably some of your listeners may do these sort of exercises where like you listen to something and you practise interpreting it and you film yourself. It's awful. Or like you get a bit of newspaper text and you practise translating it.

I don't know if anyone else does this. Oh my God, it's really icky. And then you have those awkward kind of self-reflection moments of, okay, what have I done wrong?

What have I done? Right. Um, but it's mostly just putting yourself in the situation where you have to use it.

Um, yeah. And honestly, it's such a, it's such a hard process. Like I have a lot of respect for everyone out there learning a language because the crisis of confidence is that you go through, you probably have this with French, right?

Trying to learn French.

[Luke]

Oh yeah.

[Siobhan]

You feel horrible.

[Luke]

It's not just learning this system, you know, this new system, all the vocab and grammar and the pronunciation and everything, but just constantly doing battle with your own motivation and your own self-esteem, which is like such an important part of it that you can feel, you know, there's this learning curve where when you first learn a language, you feel great and you think you're brilliant and then reality slaps you in the face.

[Siobhan]

That was me age 18.

[Luke]

Yeah. That's when you ended up in that halls of residence with loads of deaf people.

[Siobhan]

I was at that point. Yeah.

[Luke]

Yeah. And then you realise how, actually how awful you are and then you kind of like, uh, knuckle down and do some work and you gradually kind of claw your way back to a decent, respectable level. But yeah, it's constantly a process of thinking that you're good and then having your confidence knocked and then having to carry on.

And often it's the people who are able to recover from those knocks that actually go on to become really good language learners, I think. Yes.

[Siobhan]

Yes.

[Luke]

What was, what was your motivation then? What, I mean, uh, what, what is it, what was it that allowed you to have your confidence knocked and just keep going?

[Siobhan]

I don't really know because, um, friends, I suppose, deaf friends. Yeah. And actually it became my job.

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Right. Literally like I then started doing it for a job and I was like, Oh yeah, this is my income.

[Luke]

Yeah.

[Siobhan]

I have to do it. So it's interesting what you were just saying about that process because do you find that also relates to standup comedy?

[Luke]

Oh yeah.

[Siobhan]

Oh massively. And just this last week I've been in such a dip with the comedy and I've been like, Oh, Oh, just what you're saying. Oh God, you have those moments where you're like, I'm amazing.

I'm amazing. And then you're like, Oh no, I'm not.

[Luke]

No, I'm awful. Yeah. I'm in a big dip like that at the moment with comedy.

[Siobhan]

Oh really?

[Luke]

Yeah.

[Siobhan]

Same, same.

[Luke]

Yeah. It's, it's, it's tough, isn't it? Because you just have a few gigs where it's, it's not even like gigs that have gone badly.

It's just more like you haven't hit that kind of high that you have had in the past. And then by comparison, what's happening now is just very unsatisfying. Anyway, getting away from the point there.

[Siobhan]

But it's very real. It's very similar. The learning process is really similar to that.

I think it's just, I think it relates to everything you do in life, isn't it? That cycle you go through. The Maslow's cycle of competency, the, you know, consciously, consciously incompetent, unconsciously incompetent.

Do you know that one where it goes around in a cycle?

[Luke]

Yeah. And there's the Dunning-Kruger effect as well. Do you know about that one?

It's a, it's a line, which is more or less what I described before, where you start out very high. It's like your confidence and your versus time. Is it confidence versus time or ability versus time?

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Hold on a minute. I'm just, I'm just Googling it. Dunning-Kruger effect.

Uh, let me have a little look. Okay. Nice.

All my results are in French. All my Google results are in French. I keep translating it back to English, but it keeps coming back in French.

I'm going to have to translate this. So you've got, um, okay. Confidence on the left and competence.

So your skill level on the right. So from the beginning, you are a beginner. And then at the end, you're an expert.

And at the bottom, you're low or weak. And at the top, you're brilliant. And when you start, your confidence goes shooting up to this peak, uh, which is the mountain of ignorance.

[Siobhan]

That makes sense.

[Luke]

Right. And then you've got the, um, in French, chute de la réalité, which is like the, I guess, the, the, the fall of reality, right. Where you come flying down to the valley of humility.

Right. So it's like a big, big, um, peak. And then you come sliding down into the valley of humility.

And then there's like a more gradual rise back up to more or less the same point you were at the top of that mountain, where it's very gradual climb of, um, where you evaluate yourself and you come face to face with reality and you slowly claw your way back up to a more consolidated, realistic skill level at the end of this process. But it's like big rise, big fall, and then a gradual improvement. But I think that that process of rise and fall improvement, rise, fall improvement is a repeated thing that happens again and again.

[Siobhan]

Yes, I was going to say, because it's the same with the competency cycle. It goes round and round. It's like, which is a bit annoying, isn't it?

Because it would be not, I mean, do you think as much as it's repeated, does it eventually, is it always constantly upwards at least?

[Luke]

Yeah, I suppose so. Yeah, it must do. If you, if you, if you're willing to keep going, then yeah, gradually it's sort of overall goes up and up and up, I suppose.

But that, it can be a bit of a punishing cycle, can't it? And it's, it really pays off if you manage to keep going and you find the reasons to keep going and you just sort of doggedly refuse to give up. Often the way, and people I've met who've learned English to a really good level had that in them somehow.

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They had something that pushed them forwards, either because they just loved it. So for example, for you, maybe you just love sign language and it's fun to do it, but also because you were, you'd invested a lot of time into it. And at some point you get to a point of no return, where like you said, it's your job now.

So you've got, you kind of got no choice. And also when it's your job, you, you do invest time into your work and you know. Yeah.

[Siobhan]

And also the people, like you have people in your life who are deaf, who you love and, or friends that you meet. They're great people. So you want to, you know, you want to do it for them and be able to converse with them.

And yeah, and like DeafPub, it is, it's funny because I remember one of the only times I ever kind of got really scared. I went, when I first moved to London in 2006 and I had been getting drunk with deaf people in Reading, perfectly. I knew lots of deaf people there, come to London, I walk into DeafPub and I had to kind of pluck up the courage to make conversation with people and just be like, oh, hello, my name is, because I was hearing and I was only level two, I didn't feel very confident.

Oh, this is a great sign. I'm going to show you this sign. It's confident.

So it says letter C and it slides upwards when you're feeling confident and it slides downwards when you're feeling not confident.

[Luke]

Okay. So the letter C, you kind of make a letter C with your fingers and you press it against your chest. And if the letter C rises up towards your, towards your chin, that means I'm feeling confident.

If the letter C rises, drops down to the belly, that means I'm not feeling confident.

[Siobhan]

And I've seen deaf people that can really play around with it. Like they go, oh yeah, that person will like take it up above their heads. If they've got a really big head, uh, that's just, if they're like playing with language, like how we would play with words.

Um, but anyway, this day at deaf pub, I was low confidence and I walked in and I thought, okay, I'm going to get myself a drink. I'll get a packet of crisps. I'll chat to someone.

And for the first time, only time ever in my life, I sat there, I looked around, I might've maybe said to one person, oh, do you know so-and-so?

[Luke]

No.

[Siobhan]

Okay. And then I left. And I called, I called my, my boyfriend at the time.

Now my husband, I was like, I can't do it. I've left. I've left.

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I haven't, I haven't stayed and had a conversation. I've just got scared. And I just, I don't know if any of your listeners have been in the same situation where they've maybe tried to put themselves in a situation, speaking English and practising their English.

And I've just got scared or just felt, just had an attack of confidence and it's a horrible feeling. But then, you know, a couple of years later, I go back to that deaf pub. I'm there till six in the morning.

We go on to several clubs. In fact, I think I did once did a binge that lasted till 5pm the next day at deaf pub. And I really got into the party fabric of that particular community.

So it's really worth persevering, but it's so hard at the start.

[Luke]

Is it common for someone who is hearing, as you say, to learn sign language to this level?

[Siobhan]

Yeah, I know a lot of interpreters who are not, they've not got deaf family. They just, through some walk of life, they've found sign language. I remember someone once said to me when I was training, you don't choose interpreting, it chooses you.

And I suppose that's true. We all sort of fall into it somehow, but there are people who don't have any sort of deaf people in their lives. They just, you know, put their head down and train to become an interpreter.

And it is possible.

[Luke]

Yeah. So tell me about the system of sign language. You mentioned BSL, that's British Sign Language.

Are there a lot of varieties of sign language?

[Siobhan]

Yes. So it's not, a lot of people think it's universal, that it's the same across the world, but it's not. Every country has their own sign language.

You've got Longue de Signe, I think, and your, that's the sign for French, by the way, which is the twiddling moustache.

[Luke]

Yeah. Twiddling a moustache is the sign for French. I know.

[Siobhan]

It's not, yeah, it's not very, deafness, BSL doesn't have any political correctness, basically. It's a very direct language. So, sorry.

[Luke]

No, that's great. I don't think any French person is going to be upset by that.

[Siobhan]

They're not.

[Luke]

Twiddling your moustache is a French thing. That's awesome.

[Siobhan]

I don't know what the English, what the French sign for England is. It could be terrible.

[Luke]

It could be really terrible. What's the BSL sign for English person?

[Siobhan]

England. Now, my mum really mocked me when I was first learning it. And I said, oh, and I learned two signs for Ireland.

She's Irish. And I was like, Ireland? I've never seen anyone use this sign, but it's a lovely, it's the heart.

[Luke]

As if you're playing a harp.

[Siobhan]

As if you're playing a harp. But honestly, I've never, ever since my, like, years ago, I only saw that sign ever used once. So I don't think it's used.

The other one is that.

[Luke]

That's one sign for Irish.

[Siobhan]

That's one sign for Irish. The other sign is that.

[Luke]

The other sign is like flicking something off your shoulder.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, which I don't, yeah, probably isn't as ideal.

[Luke]

Why would that be Irish?

[Siobhan]

Well, I don't know. I don't know.

[Luke]

So there's that flicking something or there's, what's that? You're doing something else.

[Siobhan]

That's like a little leprechaun, a little leprechaun dancing onto your hand.

[Luke]

A little leprechaun dancing on the back of your hand. So it's like the legs of the leprechaun jumping up and down on the back of your hand. Little leprechaun, yeah.

[Siobhan]

Leprechaun. But when I told my mum these signs and then she went, what's England? And I was like that.

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And she went, ha ha ha, what a silly, anally retentive little sign.

[Luke]

So the sign for England is like you put one, you point one of your fingers forwards, place the other finger on top of it and rub it up and down a little bit.

[Siobhan]

Yes, it's the letter E. So that's the letter E and you're just rubbing your E a little bit.

[Luke]

Oh, okay.

[Siobhan]

Just rubbing your E.

[Luke]

Yeah, as you do.

[Siobhan]

In Canada, I remember being in Canada and meeting a deaf person and we couldn't really converse because Canadian sign language is different. I'll tell you why those languages are all different in a minute. But his sign for England was this.

It was like you're just like a Mountie. Like, you know, those colonial soldiers that would do that.

[Luke]

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On a horseback. Holding the front of the saddle and riding on a horse. That's their sign for an English person.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, yeah, like something like that, I think. Yeah, yeah. So it all varies.

But it's interesting as apparently back in the 1800s, there was a guy called Thomas Gallaudet or some sort of deaf pioneer who wanted to develop sign language as a language. And he comes over to England and he's like, hey, I've got this sign language. Do you want to come and teach me yours and we can create something amazing?

And apparently the English went, nope, this is our language. You're not having it. Nope, nope, not telling you.

They put their hands behind their back. They didn't share it. So then he went, wow, all right, went to France.

And the French went, yeah, sure. So they sort of created this one-handed sign language alphabet, which is used pretty much every other country apart from England, Australia and New Zealand use the one-handed sign alphabet. The languages are different because there's differences even within regions.

There's like with signs, there's a regional variation. So there's also like variation across the world, but the languages are more similar. They've all got this kind of similar kind of one-handed alphabet.

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Whereas Britain, because we didn't share, we got this, we're stuck with, you're in the pub and you're doing everything with two hands. You can't hold your drink. Very inconvenient.

[Luke]

Yeah, you can't sign, you can't hold a pint and sign at the same time. You have to put your drink down.

[Siobhan]

You do, nightmare.

[Luke]

Nightmare.

[Siobhan]

And then when the bar staff are trying to get you out, it's terrible because they can steal it.

[Luke]

Right, of course, you've got to put your pint down to say, no, hold on a minute. And then they've got it. So is there, so there's Canadian sign language.

There's the French one you mentioned. There's British sign language. Is there, there's American sign language too.

Yeah. And what, like in China, in Japan, in Russia, places like that. They've all got their own sign languages.

[Siobhan]

They have, they have.

[Luke]

So it's just like other languages then, I suppose.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, yeah, it is. Although it's a lot easier for deaf. So deaf people are brilliant at picking up other sign languages so they can adapt very easily.

I've told you about this sign before, haven't I? Where you turn dials on your chest. That's like adapting yourself to meet others' needs.

It's a great sign. Kind of really says more than you can with words.

[Luke]

As if you've got dials on your chest, like volume controls or something, and you're adjusting the dial, these big dials in the middle of your chest in order to adapt yourself or adjust yourself.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, it's a great sign, isn't it?

[Luke]

It is, it's really good. It's really good. Do you think that some of these signs are easy?

I wonder if sign language is perhaps easier to remember than other languages because of that physical movement. Because learning, you know, studying, teaching a language, one of the things I've noticed is that there's a lot of importance in memorising and mnemonics. And, you know, when you learn about mnemonics and

the ways that we remember things, connecting a new word, for example, to something else can make it more vivid and can make it more memorable.

So connecting a concept to a physical movement, like adjusting the dials on your chest, or the sea rising and falling. I mean, already I've remembered those perhaps more effectively than I would if I was remembering abstract words for those things in another language. Like if I was learning, I don't know, something, something like Turkish or something, I might not remember the word for confident and unconfident and adapting yourself, you know?

So I wonder if those physical movements somehow are easier to remember.

[Siobhan]

I think they can and they can't because sometimes they're not attached to a word. So you get some signs that are called multi-channel signs where there's not really a simple translation. It's more like, I think of an example is this, like that is FUD, which there's a sound that deaf people say when they do it, FUD.

And that means like, as if, you know what I mean? It's not got very clear translation.

[Luke]

So just putting your hand across your chest, your two fingers across your chest like that.

[Siobhan]

There's quite a lot of signs like that.

[Luke]

So it's expressing some idea of like, I don't believe it or incredulity, like, yeah, right. Yeah, that's more of an abstract sign. That's not a literal expression of the thing.

Unlike adjusting the dials is obviously a much more of a literal expression.

[Siobhan]

But it's hard to translate. Like you feel when someone's doing that, like that's there in BSL. But if you were putting that into English, you'd be like, oh, when I was adjusting myself to meet the needs, it's not got a very clear translation.

And I'm sure that must happen across lots of languages where there's something that just is encapsulated beautifully in this language, but just doesn't go easily into that language.

[Luke]

Yes, 100%. There's loads of that where there's a concept that is expressed with a word in a certain language but let's say in English, that direct translation doesn't exist. And so there's almost like a hole in your mind where this concept lives, but you don't have the word for it.

You know, I'm sure something like following through in English is a similar case. I wonder how people describe that in other languages.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, so I've been wondering about this because we're doing for our season finale of following through, we're going to get interpreters on and it's going to be myself and another fantastic interpreter podcaster called Hayley Brown. We're going to talk about how we became sign language interpreters. And I was thinking, oh, how do I sign following through?

And this is an interesting one because actually it's got two meanings. Like you discussed in a previous episode, didn't you? Because there's following through as in, right, you could do this, which is like resilience.

It's like you're putting your gloves on ready for proaction. So resilience and then continuing, you could do the sign for continuation because you've carried on with something. So following through, or you could do like an arsehole and following through, like the shit coming out of an arsehole.

[Luke]

So wait a minute, an arsehole is like the bottom of a clenched fist.

[Siobhan]

Not really, not really. Well, you can do that for anal. That's bum.

[Luke]

Like as if you're squeezing someone's bum. That's the word for bum.

[Siobhan]

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That's bum. Yeah, I won't go into too many swear words because there's a thing where hearing people always say, oh, teach us the swear words. And actually, for me as a deaf ally, it's not my place to teach the swear words.

So I would always say, you've got to ask a deaf person. And a deaf person might say, no, you're not worthy of the swear words. They hold the key.

They hold the key to that power. But I can tell you bum, that's fine.

[Luke]

Okay. We always want to learn the swear words when we're learning another language. It's always like the thing, if you're in the pub with someone and you're trying to learn their language, oh, what's the word for, you know, like bum or something?

Yeah. Often the first things we learn. So yeah.

Okay. That's interesting. So we're just talking about the fact that, yeah, there's sometimes a concept that is expressed very nicely with a sign that perhaps in words you don't have.

But so one thing I was curious about is does sign language have grammar? Does it have, you know, can you conjugate verbs into the past, the present or the future? Do you have passive forms in sign language?

To what extent is there sentence structure in sign language?

[Siobhan]

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There is a totally different grammatical system to what you have in English. And that's what people don't realise. I think they think, so they feel like they're with a deaf person, maybe at the GP, they haven't bothered to get an interpreter and they go, here's a leaflet.

And it's like, no, deaf person, well, some deaf people will be able to understand that, but there's a lot that won't make any sense to them because the language is totally different. So the best example is in English, you would say, what is your name? In BSL, you'd go, name you what?

So it's like topic, comment. That's the kind of how you would summarise the structure, topic, comment. In terms of tenses, there isn't actually a clear way of showing past tense.

So for example, walking, you can't say walk, like you want to walk in, like you sign I-N-G, that's, you don't, that doesn't exist. So you show it through the context of what you're saying. So, oh, yesterday, walk, or like tomorrow, will, walk.

Does that make sense? So you have to do it with the other words around it. And that's where I think English can be so difficult for like really grassroots deaf people, because there just isn't that tense, there aren't those tenses, there aren't those, there's a lot, there's lots of unnecessary words in English.

There's far too many words.

[Luke]

Especially when you get into a lot of prepositions and phrasal verbs and things like that.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, and they're not there in BSL.

[Luke]

Yeah, you might say something like, I've been really getting into the idea of getting through to my next door neighbour, or, you know, it doesn't make much sense, but just like all of those different prepositions and little parts of speech that sort of on their own don't seem to actually mean anything. But when you put them all together, they create something which suggests, let's say the idea of enthusiasm for communicating with someone. You know, we have a lot of these weird, de-lexicalised words in English that combine together to create quite meaningful things.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, that's an interesting example, actually. So, say that again, that sentence you did. I'm trying to think how I would interpret that.

[Luke]

I've been really getting into the idea of getting through to someone. Yeah, if I was... So, basically, it's two phrasal verbs, basically, to get into something and to get through to someone.

[Siobhan]

So, you might be like, thinking, interested, maybe contact someone?

[Luke]

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[Siobhan]

And often when you're interpreting, you'll get hearing people who are going on and on like this, and it's like, blah, blah, blah. And it doesn't make any sense because with sign language, we deal with meaning. Probably the same for a lot of spoken languages as well.

You're dealing with meaning. And so often, people aren't really saying anything. Yeah, yeah, you can do that.

[Luke]

In English, you can kind of waffle without really saying anything, right? You can say, well, you know, one of the things that has certainly been an aspect of the consideration which is necessary for taking part in the involvement of... Yeah, the involvement of a process of certainly taking into account the various factors of the, well, certainly the primary, maybe secondary aspects of part of this feeling would be, if I may be so bold...

Yeah, I didn't really say anything, did I then?

[Siobhan]

Sorry, I'm still translating you. Yeah, nothing.

[Luke]

Are you able to... So, sign language can do that, can it? Can it kind of just waffle without saying anything?

Would you say it's very focused on meaning? Everything's probably quite concrete.

[Siobhan]

Okay, so what I did just then is you said words, and I found signs that matched the words, but I didn't come to any kind of meaningful interpretation because I didn't... Because what a lot of really good interpreters do, they hold back and they wait for the person to get to their point. And then they put it all into a beautiful bit of meaningful sign, but I get too scared often to do that.

And I go, no, there's too much talking. I'm just going to put it out here and see what you want to do with that information. But yeah, I definitely...

But what I might do sometimes, and I'll do that waffle, and then once they get to the point, I would then do a quick paraphrase, where I'd go, oh, so he means this.

[Luke]

Yeah, yeah. Very sort of pragmatic, very pragmatic language.

[Siobhan]

But hopefully your listeners could get some heart from this that actually, don't worry, if you're hearing a lot of waffle, you might start to think, oh God, I'm not understanding it. It's me, it's me, it's not. Sometimes the person is talking rubbish and it's not you, it's them.

[Luke]

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Do you have nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs in sign language? Do you have parts of speech?

[Siobhan]

We have nouns. Nouns is just the objects, isn't it? Yeah.

Like, yeah, I'm forgetting my basic English language. Oh, this is embarrassing.

[Luke]

Let's say if it's... I'm trying to think of a good example of a word in its different forms. Like, do you have application, to apply, applicable?

You know what I mean?

[Siobhan]

Oh, right, okay.

[Luke]

You have different parts of speech across the same word family.

[Siobhan]

Oh, possibly not. So, no, they would have different meanings. So, application, what you're talking about, like...

[Luke]

This might be, sorry, this might be a bad example. I'm trying to think of... Communication, communicate, communicative.

Okay, let's do communicate, right? So, communicate the verb, communication, the noun, the thing, communicative, a communicative person. Let's go with those words.

[Siobhan]

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No, so within those, they would be different signs. So, that's communication, which is... Yeah, just that's communication.

But to communicate, that depends how you're communicating. So, you might communicate, so you're saying a message or you're doing a mass email, communicate, or you're phoning around or you're Skyping. It would be how you're communicating would...

That would be the sign. Does that make sense? And the other one, communicative, that would just be, oh, that person, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, or lecture, or good, communication, good.

Like, do you know what I mean? You would show it that way. Yeah, yeah, I see.

So, in sign, they're not from the same family because it's about the meaning.

[Luke]

Yeah, because, you know, part of how English works is that you have prefixes and suffixes. You have morphemes, the way that words change based on the way that certain aspects of them can be modified. But no, you have to find other ways of expressing those sorts of concepts.

[Siobhan]

And there's a lot of productive morphology in sign. So, there's a lot of... God, I haven't used these words since I trained 10 years ago, 13 years ago, blimey.

But there's a lot of, like, you watch deaf people, really great deaf poets, and they have this thing called visual vernacular, which is a form of, like, deaf poetry, which is amazing. And you watch them, and they play with signs, and they create new signs out of different signs that come together. And that can happen quite a lot.

Like, you can actually play quite a lot with language.

[Luke]

Very interesting. What about stuff like... Sorry, I'm going to just keep firing these questions at you.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, yeah, do.

[Luke]

So, in English, a lot of meaning is conveyed with not just the grammar you're using, the vocab you're using and everything, but also the way you deliver it with your voice. So, a lot of meaning is conveyed with sentence stress. So, an example that I often give to my students is that sentence, which is, I don't think you're stupid, right?

Now, you can stress different parts of the sentence. It means different things. I don't think you're stupid, but she does.

I don't think you're stupid. Honestly, I don't think you're stupid. I think they're stupid.

I don't think you're stupid. You know, you're just different. Is it possible to...

Do you have, let's say, sentence stress or contrastive stress in sign language?

[Siobhan]

So, interestingly enough, earlier, you mentioned facial expression, how when you see sign, you often see people using their facial expression. Now, actually, what happens on the face, that's called NMF, non-manual features, and it is part of our grammar. So, actually, the way the eyebrows go can affect the whole meaning of a sign.

So, you would negate. So, you might use, you might say, like, coffee and be like, coffee? Like, that shows that, no, you don't really want the coffee.

Do you know what I mean? Or if you, or you just furrow your brows to create a question mark, basically. Yeah.

So, yeah, I suppose sentence stress would be done on the face. Or with negation, where you sign something and then go, nah. So, you're like, think you're stupid?

Nah. Like, you might do that.

[Luke]

Right, I see. Yeah, that does make total sense, yeah.

[Siobhan]

You stupid? Nah. Them?

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Yes. You would have to kind of throw in some more... The implied meaning would either be covered through the facial expression, or you might just have to throw in a bit of negation or just something extra to boost it.

[Luke]

A couple of extra signs.

[Siobhan]

Or emphasis. Emphasis, sorry. Because actually, there is a really great sign, like anxious.

So, you'd be anxious. Really anxious.

[Luke]

Like, holding your hand like it's a claw over your heart and...

[Siobhan]

Yeah. It's like nerve.

[Luke]

Or two fingers.

[Siobhan]

Or you might even do it, I've seen it actually on one hand. So, a little bit nervous. A little bit nervous.

Really nervous.

[Luke]

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It's like a claw with one or two fingers tapping over your heart to suggest I'm nervous or I'm anxious.

[Siobhan]

Nervous, anxious. And then if you're really worried, like really scared, that's scared.

[Luke]

You do it with all of the fingers.

[Siobhan]

With all of the fingers if you're scared. Or if you're worried, you might go, worried. That's a little bit worried.

But really worried. Just that there's more movement. So, you can use emphasis.

[Luke]

The exaggeration of the movement is a way of emphasising. The way in English you might say, that was absolutely fantastic. You use your voice.

But in signing, you just make the sign language, you make the sign that you're doing a lot more emphatic with your body language. Make it bigger and faster.

[Siobhan]

Because I'm quite a dramatic person, I think that was quite an issue for me, training. Because I remember doing my first medical and my supervisor was like, yeah, you made that look a lot worse. Because everything was big and I was probably too excitable.

It was really exaggerating everything.

[Luke]

Yeah, can you imagine, you've got to watch out for that if someone's giving like a medical diagnosis and it's like, you've got a bad leg. You've got a terrible leg.

[Siobhan]

Oh, that's a great sign. That's a great example actually, bad. So, that's the sign for bad.

[Luke]

One little finger raised like Dr. Evil from Austin Powers.

[Siobhan]

Exactly, bad.

[Luke]

Raising one little finger.

[Siobhan]

But really bad, two little fingers. Really awful, you shake them around like awful. So, yeah.

So, that's a nice little sign to know.

[Luke]

That is interesting. So, what English does with, as I've said, sort of using your voice, intonation or stress or what we do with adjectives

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or adverbs to emphasise something. So, you might have that's bad and then if it's worse, that's really bad.

Or that's terrible or that's absolutely terrible. So, the way we modify with adverbs and with extreme adjectives in sign language, you do it by, let's say, just changing the sign a little bit, adding more to it and making it bigger and using the facial expressions. Yeah, very interesting.

Are there different... So, in English, there are many different accents and dialects, right? So, for example, even within the UK, within British English, there are a variety of accents around the country and dialects, different words for the same thing.

Is it the same in sign language?

[Siobhan]

It is. And this is something people don't realise. Like, already, people think it's the same worldwide and one of the questions I often get is, is it universal?

It is not. Not only is it not even universal around the world, it's not universal around the country. Like, there are so many regional variations and like, I have one of my best friends is from Birmingham and I met him at uni and my husband was actually talking about this yesterday when I told him about the podcast, how he learnt the sign toilet from my mate Roger.

I don't know, was it from Roger? He learnt the sign toilet from somebody, some deaf person who was probably taking the piss because nobody uses that sign.

[Luke]

So, again, I'm going to have to explain for the audio listeners that the sign that you're demonstrating, which apparently nobody actually uses, is like a fist, which represents the bowl of the toilet and the palm of your hand going over the top, like the lid of the toilet. But nobody actually uses this sign for toilet then.

[Siobhan]

No one uses it. So, somebody taught him that, but then Roger from Birmingham does that, toilet.

[Luke]

Which is like, wait a minute.

[Siobhan]

Oh, sorry. I'm so sorry. I forget this is audio.

So, you're taking your hand up to your cheek and you're tapping it against your cheek as if you're going, oh, psst, I'm going to the toilet now. I want to be really subtle. I'm just going, I'm just going to the toilet.

I'm just going to the toilet. You got that, everybody. You got that.

I'm going to the toilet. Don't make a big thing out of it. Don't tell anyone.

I don't want to shit myself and look at my podcast. I think I've followed through.

[Luke]

Don't tell anyone.

[Siobhan]

So, that's the Birmingham sign for toilet. But then a lot of other people use, you take your swearsy finger, your middle finger, and you rub it against your chest like that. So, that's toilet.

That's what most people use, toilet. Oh, no. Oh, sorry.

Actually, no, it's this side.

[Luke]

Oh, God. The other side, yeah, yeah.

[Siobhan]

I am a professional. Honest, it's early. Yeah, toilet.

And actually, it really, like, it kind of blows your mind a little bit because you think that you're going to learn this sign. It's going to be fine. But actually, yeah, it's different across regions.

Even the numbers, like Birmingham, they use the opposite side of the hand for numbers, whereas I might do like six with my thumb, seven, eight, nine. In Birmingham, they have it like seven. I can't even do the shapes that they do in Birmingham for the numbers.

It's really, I get cramp.

[Luke]

Wow, that's amazing.

[Siobhan]

I think the reason for that is because back in the day, deaf schools existed in different parts of the country, and deaf people would mix in those groups. So, therefore, the signs they developed were in that group, if that makes sense. So, that's why the regional signs were developed there.

Now, it's a lot more different. Like, deaf people travel everywhere. There's obviously Facebook and video calling, so people can mix a lot more.

But I think it's the same with any language, isn't it? Your language is going to match the people who you're with, and it's going to evolve with them. So, if anything, I think there's probably more regional variation in sign language than there is even in spoken language.

Like, you know how we have accents and different slang. I think that's even stronger in sign.

[Luke]

That's fascinating. Just what you said there, yeah, it just totally makes sense on the subject of accents as well. Just the idea of the reason that regional accents occur is because, you know, people accommodate to each other.

You know, you want to speak like the way that people speak in this area, because that's who you identify with, and so you accommodate to that form of the language. It's really interesting.

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Can I ask you, before we finish, can I ask you about some of your experiences as an interpreter?

So, you talked about the fact that you, these days, because it's your job, right? This is your full-time job, that you interpret in various situations. What are some of the most interesting interpreting jobs that you've done, if you can talk about them?

[Siobhan]

So, we sign confidentiality. That's like the most important thing, because obviously we are someone's ears and eyes, and they're trusting us to be there. So, I can't kind of go into any level of specific detail, but, you know, I've been in every domain.

Like, you're a fry on the wall in hospitals, births, deaths, theatres, with both sort of on stage for the audience and with deaf actors, TV sets, working with deaf people there, offices, social care, haven't done police. I don't fancy that, or courts. I'm like, that's too formal.

[Luke]

Too formal or too scary and dark?

[Siobhan]

True crime stuff, too formal. Yeah, too formal, I think. Basically, for me now, at the stage of life I'm in, where I'm like, you know, I've got two small children and I'm knackered, I just want to work with people who I like, basically, and who like me, and who I get on with.

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And because I know I can make sense for them. Because I don't know if this would apply to any of your listeners, but when you're using your second language and you're talking to someone who you're not sure if they get you, it really kind of adds an extra layer of stress. And I find then that my signing goes a little bit wrong because I'm self-conscious and I'm worrying about it.

Whereas if you really know someone and they know you, you can just relax. You've got the context of their work and you can really kind of, yeah, do something with it. But I'm trying to think what I can talk about.

Oh, I can probably tell you about Glastonbury, because that was public.

[Luke]

I need to stop you there and just, we need to explain what Glastonbury is, because there will certainly be quite a lot of people who won't know what that is.

[Siobhan]

Glastonbury is probably the UK's biggest music festival, would you say, Luke?

[Luke]

It is definitely the UK's biggest, and it's in fact one of the biggest in the world, if not the biggest. It's, yes, so it's an outdoor music festival and it attracts the biggest names in music. And name any of the biggest artists in music of the last 10 years, they will have done Glastonbury.

[Siobhan]

50 years probably.

[Luke]

Yeah, yeah. Beyonce, Taylor Swift, has Taylor Swift done it yet?

[Siobhan]

I think so. Coldplay do it like every year, pretty much.

[Luke]

Paul McCartney, Elton John, just, you know, all the biggest names have all done it. So yeah, this huge music festival, outdoor music festival that takes place on a farm in the southwest of England, and it's a massive event in music every year.

[Siobhan]

And this I think I can talk about because it's public. I was in the public and yeah, and I was like, it's totally public. And I was a volunteer and yeah, so everyone volunteers for that.

And this was in 2016 and I interpreted Fatboy Slim. Oh yeah. Yeah, which I kind of, yeah.

[Luke]

I imagine you interpreting Fatboy Slim is basically saying the same thing again and again and again, but faster each time.

[Siobhan]

It was mental.

[Luke]

You know, you interpreted his music.

[Siobhan]

I did. And I really went for it because obviously, you know, I'm a performer as well. And I just, and I kind of, I'd heard I was going to do it and I googled the lyrics quickly of some of the songs and I was like, okay, fucking in heaven, fucking in heaven.

And I sort of did fuck every single way, fucking in heaven, like depending on all the different angles of the fuck that you could do, like, because it varies depending on position. That's the beauty of sign. I was like, fucking in heaven, fucking in heaven, Fatboy Slim.

And I really went for it and I become like a robot. And he was doing all these like robot sounds and then it was like, and I literally like became a robot and I closed down on myself and then collapsed on the floor and the deaf people loved it. It was great.

One of them actually said, I don't really know what it is, but I'm loving it. And so I should, at some point, I need to be confident and put myself forward for doing more stuff like that. Because generally I don't, because it takes a lot of work because you've got to translate the lyrics and you've got to kind of, you know, you've got to go for that.

But actually when I have done it, I'm able to put some of the emotion into it as a sort of singer and performer as well. So I think I need to do more of that. But that was probably one of my most memorable experiences interpreting Fatboy Slim at Glastonbury.

[Luke]

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Amazing. What a brilliant job. I mean, I'm just looking at some of the lyrics for some of Fatboy Slim's work.

It looks like, although you were able to physically interpret the lyrics to some of his more complex songs, some of his well-known tracks don't have too complicated lyrics. For example, right here, right now.

[Siobhan]

Oh, that was, that was quite easy. Yeah.

[Luke]

Yeah. Because the lyrics for that are literally this, right here, right now.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, I like that one.

[Luke]

Right here, right now, right here, right now. Next verse, right here, right now, right here. And then there's, yeah, so.

[Siobhan]

Eat, sleep, rave, repeat was really hard because I had to be like, eat, sleep, rave, repeat, eat, sleep, rave, repeat. And I was doing it faster and faster and in different, and I was, it became like a tongue twister where eventually I was like, oh, I'm raving, I'm sleeping, I'm eating, I'm, it was very, it got very complicated.

[Luke]

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Sounds brilliant. I'd love to ask you more about other jobs you've done, but I understand you have to be confidential about them.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, I just, because it's hard, because I'm a comedian as well. And people often say, oh, do stuff about work. But it's like, I just couldn't, you can't break that trust.

It's not worth it. You just, I don't want people to think I would do that because I can't.

[Luke]

You can't tell us about like any awkward moments or funny experiences you've had, I suppose.

[Siobhan]

No, but I could sort of talk generally about like, I suppose, things that are hard to translate. Like I remember in cooking, like I can't cook. And I've heard like when I've done various cooking jobs, um, someone saying like, sweat the carrots.

It's like, sweat the, what? How do you sweat a carrot? What are you talking about?

So little things like that. It's like, what? No, I'm just looking at them like, what?

Just speak English. What? And then, you know, when you don't understand something and you ask someone to repeat it and they don't, they just repeat sweat carrots, sweat the carrots, sweat the carrots.

You're like, no, I don't know how you sweat a bloody carrot. So things like that come up all the time.

[Luke]

Yeah, just some very specific things that are really difficult to express. Yeah. Sweat a carrot.

That is silly, isn't it?

[Siobhan]

It is. I'm sure other languages have that sort of nonsense, particularly with cooking. Recipes have got all sorts of silly words that you don't need.

This is why I don't cook.

[Luke]

Yeah, yeah, right. So what is the world like today for deaf people, do you think? What's it like to be a deaf person today?

[Siobhan]

I think it's funny because I obviously have been a deaf ally since the age of 18 and I've got deaf friends. And I think for a majority of hearing people, they would view it as a disability. But the way I view it is as a linguistic and cultural minority.

And I see deaf people as very empowered and I see them in high positions in workplaces. And what's really great also, there's more representation now on TV. So theatre and TV are suddenly kind of

wanting to invest more in deaf actors and there's more deaf comedians as well.

So I think it's quite an exciting time, actually, to be deaf in the UK. I don't know about the rest of the world. I'm a bit concerned about America, to be honest.

[Luke]

Well, we all are, aren't we?

[Siobhan]

Yeah, apparently he's closed the Department of Education and he's taking away statements for people with disabilities. And that does worry me because obviously, if that happens here, then I, at the moment, I do a lot of work with deaf professionals and I'm funded through a government department called Access to Work. So if we get a right-wing government in who suddenly decide that deaf people don't need to work, then I'm out of a job.

But that's not the worst thing about that. The worst thing is that deaf people are out of jobs. Yeah, so we're great now in England, but there's always risks.

And, you know, funding cuts to disability budgets, we're always a threat of that. And there's this real empowerment on one hand, but then sometimes there's little steps back that are coming up all the time. There's still barriers that deaf people are having to face all the time.

Social media has made it better in a way because deaf people can kind of communicate with everyone. And finally, people are

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subtitling their videos, not because of deaf people, they do it now because of their own promotional reasons, which annoys me a bit because hearing people are suddenly using subtitles because it suits them. And it's like, you should have been using it all along to make it accessible for them.

It bothers me. So there's still a lot of challenges, I'd say, for deaf person. And actually, social media, it could present more challenges because whereas back in the day, deaf people would go to deaf club and you'd all meet there and it was all face to face.

And that was really their only communication. Now they don't necessarily need to do that. So the deaf pub, the deaf club is kind of not as used as it was.

It's mostly older people that do that, which is a bit sad, actually, because it's a great institution. Yeah, sorry, that's a bit waffly. Does that answer your question?

[Luke]

No, that's great. No, that makes total sense. I was also wondering about AI.

[Siobhan]

Ah, yeah. What about that? Yeah, OK.

This is an interesting one because part of my job as an interpreter is a deaf person will show me an email sometimes and say, oh, could you just spruce that up a little bit and make it like more fancy English? AI is doing that now. So yeah, so, you know, there could

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be instances where, oh, I'm not actually going to get employed for that job because AI is doing it.

And also there is research going in to AI sign language translation. So me and my colleagues have all been like, oh, God, OK. AI is going to do sign language translation.

[Luke]

How would that be? That would be like an AI avatar on the screen doing the signing at the same time.

[Siobhan]

Yeah.

[Luke]

Wow.

[Siobhan]

I mean, Google Translation is pretty effective. I don't know if your listeners have used it much. Have you used it?

Like, it's getting better, isn't it?

[Luke]

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

[Siobhan]

It's a bit scary, but it is good. This is the thing. There's me saying, oh, it's a bit scary.

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But actually, here's the problem. I shouldn't really exist. Like, if the world was perfect, I wouldn't have a job because everyone would sign and everyone could communicate.

So I am a necessary evil. So I shouldn't be the AI apps and these things that are going to help deaf people. Anything that helps deaf people is great because I'm a deaf ally and that's what I want.

But then you are also like, oh, God.

[Luke]

This is the thing about AI, though, isn't it? Is that it's so great that it's going to destroy the world. Do you know what I mean?

[Siobhan]

Because no one will have a job.

[Luke]

Yeah. It's so brilliant. It'll solve all our problems.

And then what will we do? You know, that's what makes the world go around, isn't it? Really problem solving.

All of human endeavour is there to kind of solve each other's problems. And that's how we make this whole thing work. But with AI, you know, everyone's going to be just completely at a loose end.

That's one of the things about AI is that it will take all of our jobs away and make our lives somehow meaningless. But yeah, I can see that on one hand for the deaf community, AI is a great thing

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because it can certainly help communicate. But then for people like you who work as an interpreter, that's a challenge to your job.

Yeah, it's similar for me, you know, that as AI develops, English teachers might become redundant.

[Siobhan]

Will they? Well, AI, oh, because of translation, because people won't bother learning English?

[Luke]

All sorts of reasons. All sorts of things that there's obviously the translation where people will essentially have that, that fish from The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, just the thing you stick in your ear, and it automatically translates everything in real time.

[Siobhan]

There's that.

[Luke]

But also, even for podcasting, the thing I think I've talked about a few times is that more and more we're seeing AI generated audio content. Yeah, so you could do it now with Google's Notebook LM. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

So, ChatGPT is a language model that's based on all the language that they could ever find that they've shoved inside the machine. But Notebook LM is another language model. It's generative AI, but it uses input.

So you can give it input. Let's say you feed it a PDF from your university. Your lecturer has given you a PDF.

You feed it the PDF, and it will process everything within that PDF, and it'll sort of summarise it or turn it into bullet points, or it will give you a study plan for it, or it will do all these things to help you study with it. But one of the functions it has is the audio summary. And if you click on audio summary, and this is completely free, it will produce a 10-minute audio conversation between two podcast hosts.

They're both completely AI-generated voices. And it's stunning the realism of the conversation. They interrupt each other.

They talk over each other. They react. Their voices have this intonation and stuff like that.

And you can kind of modify the conversation. You can say, focus on this aspect, focus on that aspect. And basically, you can create a 10-minute podcast episode based on whatever it is you've given to it.

And it's incredibly realistic. I mean, it's not very good, really, yet, because you don't get that human element. It's not very funny.

It's very, very, very generic. But it's incredibly, incredibly realistic.

[Siobhan]

The thing is, I think if we can get to a stage where AI is used to help us, because I think a lot of people are working too hard, and

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they're trying to do jobs, particularly in the education sector. Everyone's running to school. There's no budgets.

Everyone's working too hard. They're trying to do the jobs of two people. If you can use AI to make that easier, sending an email, it takes ages to word an email.

Yeah, brilliant. Use it for that. If it can be used to make jobs easier and for everyone to have a better work-life balance, then that's great, as long as it's not going too far.

I mean, I think it can't replace humanity. It can't replace the human stuff. And the thing is, with being an interpreter, deaf community and interpreters have a symbiotic relationship.

We've been together since the beginning of time. And actually, I see my deaf clients as colleagues. And we get on, and we kind of help each other.

And it's just another human relationship in the workplace. And surely, you can't replace that.

[Luke]

Yeah, well, this is what people always say. But I've got this sneaking suspicion that AI will get to a level of sophistication where it will completely understand all of our codes. And it will be able to produce content that is entertaining and funny.

[Siobhan]

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But there's enough people out there doing podcasts and audio content. Why would anyone need to listen to a robot when there's so many humans doing it?

[Luke]

Because they will be able to, you know, they'll just type in, right, give me a, you know, I've got a 20-minute journey to work. Give me a 20-minute conversation about ducks. Because I love ducks.

And I want you to teach me 10 duck-related idioms. And also, I want there to be a joke every 30 seconds.

[Siobhan]

I mean, trying to wade through that, you'd be like a duck out of water.

[Luke]

Yeah, absolutely.

[Siobhan]

Come on, give me a duck pun, give me a duck pun.

[Luke]

I would be absolutely, I don't know, something about quacking. Quack, I know, I'm thinking that. I'd be all quacked out.

I'd be completely ducked. Duck tape, I don't know. I've got nothing, I've got nothing.

I'll have to ask ChatGPT to come up with, yeah, completely, I think we'd all be completely quackers if we were to do that. And I don't

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know, the fact is even, it would be free, so they wouldn't even have to send you the bill. So yeah, people will be, it might become preferable because people will be able to define exactly what they want and it'll give them exactly what they want.

And they can choose what voice it's in, what accent it's in, the speaking speed, everything. So who knows? Maybe it will actually be better.

But we're a little way away from that at the moment.

[Siobhan]

It won't affect us. It might affect our children, but we'll be dead by then. So whatever.

[Luke]

It doesn't matter.

[Siobhan]

It won't affect us.

[Luke]

Yeah, no, who cares? Look, it's been really interesting talking to you and finding out about sign language and stuff. Just before we go, what are some of your favourite signs that you could perhaps teach me and that we could describe to my audience?

How would you sign Luke's English podcast?

[Siobhan]

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Oh, so you would spell your name, Luke. Although what I like to do when people have the name beginning with L, I like to do a nice big L because that's actually like American sign languages with the letter L. And it's really nice.

[Luke]

Just holding up.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, just holding up. You'd have to spell it first, but then after that you just go Luke, English, podcast.

[Luke]

So podcast is like...

[Siobhan]

I think so. I think it is. I need to clarify this with Deaf HQ.

[Luke]

This is holding up a microphone. It's like holding up a microphone to your mouth. That's podcast.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, podcast. There might be other signs for it, but I should tell you about sign names actually. So what you do in the Deaf community, so you don't have to spell your name every time, you get given a sign.

So it's something that encapsulates your personality. So for me, when I first got to uni, my mate Roger gave me about 13 sign names before we settled on the one that would be appropriate to

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use for lectures. So I was Siobhan, which means shit because I was always announcing when I was going for a poo.

[Luke]

Wait a minute, that name was the word for shit?

[Siobhan]

Oh yeah, but I shouldn't be teaching you that. But yeah, shit.

[Luke]

Oh yeah, yeah, right.

[Siobhan]

That's the Deaf people are the cult. Oh, you got that one for free, guys. Oh, that was naughty.

[Luke]

Just remember my audio listeners as well, that if we do a sign, we need to describe it.

[Siobhan]

Oh, I'm so sorry, audio listeners. I'm terrible at thinking about you. I do love you.

I do love you still.

[Luke]

I don't know if everyone's noticed, but I've been trying to get the descriptions in as much as I can. So anyway, the first name that Roger suggested was a name relating to the word shit because you were always, what, going to the toilet?

[Siobhan]

And announcing when I was going for shit.

[Luke]

You were always announcing. If you did, you would announce it. Okay, everybody, I'm now going to go to the toilet.

[Siobhan]

Toilet, I'm going to the toilet. Did I sign again?

[Luke]

There we go again from Birmingham. All right, guys.

[Siobhan]

And then I remember that first night being up with Deaf people and I kept telling them when I was farting. My mate Roger went, I'm Deaf, you don't need to tell me.

[Luke]

Right, right, yeah, yeah.

[Siobhan]

I had done the sign for fart. And we went through about 13 until eventually we went to this, which basically what I'm doing now, guys, is I'm holding my hand up like I'm shaking a bottle of ketchup. So that is my sign name, Siobhan.

Now it's held with the fingers facing towards you. If you turn it the other way, it looks like the sign for wanker. So you have to be really careful.

And there was a teacher at university that didn't like me and she would sign Siobhan. And it's like, no, move your hand the other way. It's ketchup, not wanker.

So that's me, I'm Siobhan because I was always putting ketchup on everything. My husband has a very unfortunate sign name because his name is Dave. And he, in the first week of uni, he wasn't doing my course, but he ended up being in the same halls and being accosted by deaf people all the time.

He got really drunk. And the first time he met the deaf community, he vomited everywhere. So his sign name is Vomit, which is like a hand coming out of your mouth, like you're being sick.

And the funny thing is, he's now a head teacher of a primary school and he's got a deaf unit and he's employed deaf staff before. And I know this deaf staff member and I was like, Dave, and she was like, what was that? I'm like, oh, no, that's, and I had to explain about his sign name and he's like a big professional and now her boss.

And he just keeps saying, look, can I have a new sign name? And me and the deaf community, mostly Roger are like, no, no, you're stuck with it. So is that what we do for you, Luke?

Because that's a letter L, it's nice. It lends itself to signing, but it's not very specific to you. What's something about your personality that could be your sign name?

[Luke]

Oh, I don't know. I suppose on the podcast, I'm known for rambling on and on and on and just shutting up. So it's a bit like Dave's really, isn't it?

Not vomiting, but vomiting words. There's that, I don't know.

[Siobhan]

You could be like, speaky, speaky, speaky, speaky, speaky boy.

[Luke]

Speaky, speaky, speaky boy. This is like, like a duck. There we go again.

So this is like, listeners, that sign that you would imagine for someone talking a lot. You know, it's like your hand is a mouth, opening and closing.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, yeah, you could do that. I mean, or if it wants to have it really like speaking, it's like by your mouth like that, speak like Luke, Luke.

[Luke]

Right.

[Siobhan]

I think I will go with that. Should we go with that for Luke?

[Luke]

Just like, yeah, like a crab.

[Siobhan]

Like a crab. Yeah, like a ducky crab.

[Luke]

Yeah, like a duck or a crab.

[Siobhan]

Yeah, okay.

[Luke]

All right, great.

[Siobhan]

So I've got my own sign name. Luke's English podcast. There we go.

[Luke]

Luke's English podcast.

[Siobhan]

I think you'd be good at sign. You actually might take to it quite well. There's some people who really take to it like a duck to water.

[Luke]

There you go.

[Siobhan]

There we go. Another one. They take to it quite nicely.

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Dyslexic people take to it very nicely as well, actually, because they're not very audio learners. They're visual learners. So a lot of them really kind of click with it.

So you never know. That might be something you could look at in the future.

[Luke]

Luke's English podcast. Yeah, I'd love to learn some sign language. It's really cool.

All right, brilliant. Well, thanks a lot for that. And well, normally at this point with a guest, I would say to people if they want to follow you or find out more about you or listen to more of your stuff, where can people go?

Do you have social media? You've got your podcast. What can you tell my audience about?

[Siobhan]

Oh, I mean, I love your audience already. I've had a few chats with them on YouTube. So I would really love to learn more about your audience and interact with them more.

Please, guys, find me on Instagram. I don't have that many followers and I'm a comedian, so I want more followers. It's really good for my self-esteem.

So at Uncle Siobhan on Instagram, you can type in Siobhan Dodd or. But yeah, at Uncle Siobhan is my Instagram handle. Also, the

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podcast that Luke was a guest on on episode six is called The Following Through podcast.

And it's all about overcoming challenges in trying circumstances, plus stories about shitting yourself. It's a lot of fun and you get to learn more about how English people talk about poo. We have an Instagram, which is at following through pod.

We also have a Facebook page, The Following Through podcast. So please check us out there. We're on Spotify, Apple, all major podcast streaming services.

So it would be great if you could give us a listen and give us a follow. We would love you forever.

[Luke]

Fantastic. OK, great. Well, have a lovely rest of the day.

[Siobhan]

And thank you. That's the sign for thank you, like a hand coming from your chin.

[Luke]

What's your welcome then?

[Siobhan]

Ah, doesn't exist. That's very English. Yeah, you're welcome.

It doesn't. You can do your welcome, but it doesn't really. It's not really.

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It doesn't really mean anything. It's like, thank you. Oh, great.

[Luke]

Just oh, great. Thumbs up.

[Siobhan]

Thumbs up.

[Luke]

Thank you.

[Siobhan]

Oh, no problem. Fine, fine.

[Luke]

No problem. Nice one. Yeah.

OK.

[Siobhan]

There we go. Another language point to end on.

[Luke]

Very good. Very good. OK, thanks a lot.

Have a lovely day and catch up with you next time.

[Siobhan]

Great. Thank you very much.

[Luke]

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OK, listeners. So that was Siobhan Dodd talking about sign language. And to be honest, that was everything I expected it would be.

I said at the beginning that I was curious to learn about sign language and how it works and stuff like that. And Siobhan told me all the things I expected she would. And so that's exactly what I wanted from the conversation.

Really enjoyed that and very interesting to learn about it. And of course, you know, sign language, it's a language. So of course, it's going to have a lot of the same features as other languages, you know, accents and dialects and, you know, the process of learning it and all the things that you get from, let's say, English.

A lot of that is present in something like sign language as well. So very interesting. I hope that you enjoyed that and you learned a few things.

If you're an interpreter, maybe from English to another language or whatever, then you might have found parallels between what you do and what Siobhan does. But as always, I'd like to read your comments. So do leave your thoughts in response to the episode.

It would be nice to hear from you. What else do I want to say? Oh, yeah.

So there were some there were some duck idioms and duck expressions. I can't remember the moment now the time I record this because I've had since recording that conversation, I've had lunch, done a band practise and I'm back again now to do the

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outro to this. But I remember there was a moment where there was an opportunity for me to come up with some duck related jokes, right?

Some duck puns or duck gags. And I think I completely failed to do it on the spot. I came up with something about a bill.

I think a bill is the beak. A duck's beak is called a bill. Also, you have to pay a bill as well.

It was something related to that, wasn't it? And yeah, so I failed to do the duck jokes, but that's all right. But then there were a few little idioms as well.

Siobhan kept adding in duck related idioms. So we had to take to something like a duck to water. It means that you learn to do it really easily.

Okay, like it's just the most natural thing in the world. Like if you put a duck on a pond of water, it will just feel totally comfortable and at home. How did Siobhan use that?

Did she say that I might be good at sign language? That maybe if I started doing sign language, I might take to it like a duck to water. I think that might have been what she said.

Anyway, there's that one, like a duck to water. Some other duck related idioms, which perhaps didn't come up in the conversation, but which I can teach you now. One of them is to be a sitting duck.

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If you are a sitting duck, it means you're an easy target. Okay, a sitting duck is an easy target. I don't know, like let's say you go to a stand up comedy show and your friend says, let's sit on the front row.

And you say, no, no, no, I don't want to sit on the front row. We'll be a sitting duck, you know, meaning the comedian might make jokes about us or something like that. We'll be an easy target, a sitting duck.

I suppose that comes from hunting. It's a pity to mention hunting or the hunting of birds, but I suppose that's where the expression comes from, a sitting duck. A duck that's just sitting there is obviously easy to, it's easy to target, isn't it?

So that's a sitting duck. To take to something like a duck to water. Another one is, like water off a duck's back, like water off a duck's back.

Now, have you ever seen water splashing on a duck's back? The water just rolls off the feathers, right? It just rolls off really easily because those feathers are covered in a kind of oil which makes them sort of waterproof or water resistant.

And the water just rolls off the back of a duck. It rolls off the feathers. So like water off a duck's back, normally this relates to when someone is criticised, but the criticism doesn't bother them.

So someone makes a criticism of this person, but the criticism doesn't really bother them. It's just like water off a duck's back. It just rolls off, okay?

So that's, you know, it's like, oh, don't worry about him. He's not, you know, it's like water off a duck's back. He doesn't mind.

Another one is to get your ducks in a row to get all your ducks in a row, to have all your ducks in a row or to get all your ducks in a row. And this means that you've got everything organised and maybe if you, this is the sort of idiom that's used at work. It's kind of like management jargon.

I thought we just, Luca just wanted to touch base with you. Just have a quick word just to make sure we've got all our ducks in a row, which means that we both agree and see things the way that they are, that we have everything organised, everything straight and that we understand how everything's working. Everything's organised, prepared and up to date and we're all in agreement on it.

Let's, you know, we've got everything organised. All our ducks are in a row, okay? And then, is that it?

Sitting duck, all your ducks in a row, like water off a duck's back and like a duck to water. Yeah, that's it. Also, Siobhan said, like a duck out of water, but actually, I have to correct her on that one.

It's like a fish out of water. So if you're in a situation where you feel completely out of your depth, out of your comfort zone, you can say that you're like a fish out of water. Like for example, when I went to Vietnam and I was walking down the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, didn't know how to cross the road properly, didn't really know how to get around, I was sticking out like a sore thumb.

Sticking out like a sore thumb. Why is that difficult to say? I was sticking out like a sore thumb.

Can you say that? I was sticking out like a sore thumb. Sticking out like a sore thumb.

I felt like a fish out of water. Yes, okay. But then I go back to England and I'm walking through the streets of London and it's, you know, I take to that situation like a duck to water.

Okay, anyway, I thought I would just mention those at the end. It's always a good, you know, any opportunity to teach you a couple of idioms on this podcast. But that's the end of the episode.

You can find Siobhan through the channels mentioned before, her Instagram, her podcast. You'll find links on the page for this episode on my website. Thanks again to Siobhan and check out my appearance on the following through podcast recently if you want to.

I'll stick a link to that as well. You'll find that there as well. But otherwise, have a lovely morning, afternoon, evening or night and stay cool, stay calm, stay connected out there in podcast land.

Be lovely and excellent to each other. Okay, peace on earth and goodwill to all men. Why am I saying that?

I don't know, but it's a good message and I'll speak to you next time. But for now, it's just time to say good bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.