



FAKING IT Thamsanqa Jantjie made money as a sign language interpreter at high-profile events, but after his performance at Madiba's memorial service, he was outed as a fake PHOTO: LUCKY MAIBI

Aftermath of a fake sign language interpreter

Jabulane
Blose



This year's National Disability Month is taking place against the backdrop of 20 years of democracy and the aftermath of the infamous fake sign language interpreting at Nelson Mandela's memorial service at FNB Stadium last December.

These events give us the opportunity to reflect on the first 20 years of democracy and its impact on the lives of deaf South Africans.

I should start by saying that I am not about to denigrate sign language interpreters. I am the first to acknowledge that they provide an invaluable service and have complex relationships with the sign language community. In fact, many mistakenly believe a sign language interpreter is the metonym for sign language and deaf people.

They should be classified as holding scarce skills and a development programme should immediately be instituted.

The good thing about the FNB Stadium incident is that it brought the issue of sign language and interpreting to the attention of the public. The country was united in its condemnation of the embarrassment visited upon it. It was like South Africans of all hues were, for the first time, realising they coexist with deaf people.

It was a surreal experience.

The lure of money for jam and relatively easy entry into the profession encourages the likes of Thamsanqa Jantjie, who was exposed as a fake at Mandela's memorial service, to emerge and thrive. The profession is without an enforceable code of conduct to maintain standards, trust and accountability. There is no pecking order, and dissatisfied clients have no recourse in case of complaints or bad service. It resembles the Wild West, where the weak shall stand by the wall and the strong shall claim the title.

Whenever a deaf person is asked by an

interpreter, in a meeting or social setting, to repeat a statement, that should raise an alarm about the skills, competence and value orientation of the interpreters involved. Such incidents are fairly common and are even the butt of jokes in the deaf community. These are not only facetious, but make a deaf person sound and appear inane, unintelligible and senselessly "dumb".

Compounding these is the general lack of awareness about the use of sign language interpreters and the understanding that a deaf person has a right to an informed sign language interpreter of choice. In job interviews, court cases, medical diagnoses, crime reporting, or social settings, such incidents end up with more demeaning or tragic results.

Time will tell what effect Jantjie's foray into sign language interpreting has on accountability within the profession. That can only advance the cause of disability rights in South Africa.

Census 2011 estimates that 5.1% of the population is deaf, yet 20 years into our democracy, there's little indication sign language is being actively promoted and developed. This despite the president's proclamation in December 2012 that sign language must be developed and standardised for it to be one of the official languages. It is of serious concern that for 20 years, the constant refrain from government departments to constitutional institutions has been the same: it's not our mandate.

The mandate should be demystified during a sign language indaba. This subject has, for far too long, been avoided and left at the periphery of government and institutional programmes.

The commitment by the department of basic education to allow deaf pupils to choose sign language as a first language recognises the argument by the deaf sector that inclusion in schools and society on an equal basis is only possible when deaf children have access to sign language.

As we celebrate Disability Month, we face a choice: return to business as usual or embrace the need for positive change. So, together, we owe it to this country to allow the winds of change to blow through the sign language community.

Blose is chair of the SA National Deaf Association