



**Northeastern University**  
*Center for Atypical Language Interpreting*

CALI LANGUAGE ANALYSIS TEAM 2 (LAT2) REPORT  
2021



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## INTRODUCTION

A 2015 report entitled *Preparing Interpreters for Tomorrow: Report on a Study of Emerging Trends in Interpreting and Implications for Interpreter Education* was prepared by the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) at Northeastern University at the request of the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). One of the findings of the report is that there is an increasing number of d/Deaf individuals who have idiosyncratic and atypical language use that requires interpreting practitioners to possess superior interpreting competency to meet the linguistic and access demands of this portion of the d/Deaf population (p. 7). The need for more specialized knowledge and competence exists, and the pathways to prepare working interpreters to address these demands needs to increase.

In response to this report, the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) allotted funding for a project to begin responding to these unique needs. Northeastern University's American Sign Language and Interpreting Education Program was awarded an RSA grant to establish the Center for Atypical Language Interpreting (CALI) to operate from January 2017-December 2021. During this time, CALI has offered an array of programs and resources to assist working interpreters in gaining the additional competence to better serve those d/Deaf individuals who use atypical language<sup>1</sup>.

One of the first activities of CALI was the recording of samples of atypical language by d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals in three states—Massachusetts, New York, and California. Approximately 60 d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals were filmed. About half of the individuals filmed agreed to having their samples used broadly for training purposes. The remainder agreed for their samples to be used for language analysis purposes only. To assist with reviewing and assessing the samples collected, a team of experts in linguistics, interpreting, and Deaf education was assembled. The team was comprised of MJ Bienvenu, Dennis Cokely, Christopher Kaftan, Daniel Langholtz, and Anna Witter-Merithew. This Language Analysis Team (LAT) met face-to-face August 7-9, 2017 at Northeastern University and a copy of the report of their process and findings is available on the CALI website:

[https://www.northeastern.edu/cali/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CALI-Language-Analysis-Team-Report\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://www.northeastern.edu/cali/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CALI-Language-Analysis-Team-Report_PUBLIC.pdf). The findings from the LAT report were used as a foundation for the Program of Study that has been offered by CALI since 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there remains discussion within the Deaf Community and the fields of interpreting and interpreting education as to whether the term “atypical” or the phrase “atypical language” is an appropriate term for describing the language used by d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals who exhibit inconsistent language behaviors that impact the comprehensibility of their signed messages. CALI has facilitated some of the discussion around this topic. One recent example of such a discussion is available in a webinar hosted by CALI that brought together a group of Deaf Community leaders to discuss the issue of labels, atypical language, and the implications for interpreting. Entitled Webinar: Conversation Series, the recording can be found at <https://www.northeastern.edu/cali/conversation-series-interpreters-on-interpreting-with-people-who-use-atypical-language-2/>. CALI remains open to alternative terms that may emerge as a result of these important discussions and remains focused on the implications for interpreting that result from language dysfluency or language deviation that is inconsistent with the norms of sign language users in the United States.

Furthermore, the language samples that were filmed with permission for training purposes were used in various ways throughout the CALI programs. For example, the CALI Program of Study incorporates online learning modules and face-to-face instruction, followed by practical experience placements, as well as supervised induction, and communities of practice. In support of the Program of Study, selected language samples were woven into the curriculum and learning activities to provide learners/practitioners with exposure and experience with the variations and idiosyncrasies exhibited as part of atypical sign language.

Language samples were also used in some of the learning resources CALI has developed to increase awareness of the challenges associated with interpreting for d/Deaf individuals who use atypical language, and to improve practitioner decision-making. One such resource is the *Unfolding Scenarios*—a collection of 12 interpreting scenarios, structured from the perspective of a Deaf interpreter (DI), hearing interpreter (HI) or team of interpreters. Each scenario includes five to seven decision points where the interpreter must decide how to proceed. In addition to the 12 stand-alone scenarios, eight of the scenarios include additional video footage presenting sample interpreter responses and reflections. Embedded in the scenarios are clips taken from the language samples of d/Deaf individuals who use atypical language. These clips provide the consumer context needed to respond to the various decision points within the scenarios. See <https://www.northeastern.edu/cali/unfolding-scenarios/unfolding-scenarios-videos/> to access the *Unfolding Scenarios* and the associated Curriculum Guide and Learner Handbook.

The 2020-2021 COVID pandemic shifted some of the CALI face-to-face training events to online events, and as a result, allowed for some funds to be shifted to other purposes. One such purpose was the expansion of the original work of the 2017 Language Analysis Team (LAT) to include examples of language assessments conducted by a group of Deaf interpreters, ASL and interpreting educators, and linguists. The team was comprised of Dr. MJ Bienvenu (TX), Dr. Rosemary Wanis (CA), Mr. Vyron Kinson (GA), Ms. Stephanie Kay Vincent (CA), and Ms. April Jackson (DC). The project coordinator was Ms. Anna Witter-Merithew (NC). Between March and July 2021, the team, referred to as the LAT2, conducted an assessment of seventeen (17) language samples selected from the videos that had permission for use as training materials. This report summarizes the work and outcomes of the LAT2.

## GOALS

The LAT2 was assembled in response to feedback from program participants and facilitators that there was need for examples of analyses of atypical language. So, in addition to being able to see clips of different individuals as part of the curricular and resource materials used by program participants, there was the need to see samples of language assessments of a range of d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals, for the purpose of gaining deeper insight into the implications of language use for the interpreting process.

As a result of this program feedback, two goals were established for the LAT2. The first goal was to document the use of specific language features to identify patterns and the implications of the patterns for message meaning and comprehension. The second goal was to offer interpreter practitioners recommendations about how an individual's language use impacted the interpreting process and what strategies would be the most effective in providing interpreting services and language access with consumers who use atypical sign language. The overarching goal is to increase the ability of interpreters to adapt their language use and interpreting strategies to meet the linguistic needs of a broader range of d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals.

## PROCESS

In selecting the language samples to be assessed, several factors were considered:

- Which of the original samples filmed by CALI in 2016-2017 were available for training purposes
- Which of the available samples provide the most diverse range of language use based on regional variation/geographic location, age, gender, racial diversity, and other contributing factors (such as disability, education, degrees of deviation from ASL/BASL language norms and degrees of comprehensibility)
- Which of the samples provide a clear and direct view of the signer and enhances accessibility to what they are signing

A total of seventeen (17) language samples were identified—two to be used for training of the LAT2 assessors and fifteen to be divided between the pool of assessors for use in conducting language assessments. More than half of the available samples were used for the language assessments and are available for training purposes.

When the language samples were originally filmed, there were two camera angles used. One angle captured a side view of an interviewer and the d/Deaf or DeafBlind individual sitting across from each other and engaged in an interview. The other angle was a front view of the d/Deaf or DeafBlind individual responding to questions from the interviewer. The second angle provides a clear, visible, and direct view of the signer and allows for easier access to the individual's use of language. It was determined that this was the angle that would be used for the purpose of the language assessment.

## EXAMPLE COMMENTS

The videos were uploaded into GoReact and the raters entered their remarks within the GoReact comments column on the right side of the screen. They used a combination of feature markers<sup>2</sup> followed by filmed ASL or written English comments. Here are a few examples of what was indicated in the language assessments<sup>3</sup>:

### EXAMPLE #1

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**Marker:** MN-Meaning

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<sup>2</sup> Feature markers were pre-loaded markers that are tied to specific features of ASL. Examples include the use of depiction, spatial structuring, vocabulary and fingerspelling. For this project, there were a total of twenty (20) common features pre-loaded into GoReact for use by the LAT2. LAT2 assessors were not limited to these 20 features—they could reference additional features as appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> The examples are drawn from comments posted in written English. Many of the comments are posted in ASL and can be viewed within the assessment.

**Comment:** In response to the interviewer's question about her background--where she grew up, etc.--the signer responds by indicating that her parents were unsure what to do when they found she was deaf. She indicates INFORMED-to (unspecified to who). (Someone unspecified) INFORMS NEEDS GO SCHOOL. COME TEACHER (unspecified to where). SIGN-to (who unspecified). Production of SIGN-to appears to indicate the unspecified receiver of the signs did not understand. Meaning unclear.

#### EXAMPLE #2

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**Marker:** GR-grammar

**Comment:** Kernel sentence structure continues--averaging 3-4 signs per sentence. Signer indicates that she quit school in '78 and repeats this point again stating that she left in '78.

#### EXAMPLE #3

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**Marker:** DE-depiction

**Comment:** PAPER MACHINE [depicts placing paper into a shredding machine], SHRED PAPER, WORK, ME+

#### EXAMPLE #4

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**Marker:** CP-comprehensibility

**Comment:** Was he sick at birth, or did he become sick sometime after birth? Unclear.

#### EXAMPLE #5

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**Marker:** PD-production

**Comment:** Sign for NURSE for nursing home produced like CONTRACT. Also, hand movements stiff. Signed FATHER with 5-handshape then moved to the sign for DEAD with the same handshape and stiff movements. Result is a production error for the handshape used for the sign DEAD.

#### EXAMPLE #6

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**Marker:** PD-production

**Marker:** FS-Fingerspelling

**Comment:** Using both hands as dominant hand simultaneously to sign "I forgot to tell you...my father died from K-I-D-N-E-Y (some repetition of letters to correct spelling) fail."

## EXAMPLE #7

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**Marker:** FS-Fingerspelling

**Comment:** SD representing San Diego

## EXAMPLE #8

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**Marker:** MN-meaning

**Comment:** Dad passed away in jail, or she didn't remember him because he was in jail... not sure of meaning for "MISSING" or "GONE" so statement unclear regarding meaning.

These examples provide a sampling of the feature markers and comments associated with the language analysis. What follows is a list of the twenty (20) feature markers that were pre-loaded into GoReact for ready use by the LAT2 assessors:

- Cohesion-creating device (CO)
- Coherence (CH)
- Comprehensibility (CP)
- Constructed Action (CA)
- Constructed Dialogue (CD)
- Depiction (DE)
- Fingerspelling (FS)
- Grammar (GR)
- Hand Dominance (HD)
- Meaning (MN)
- NMM (NM)
- Production (PD)
- Pronoun (PN)
- Prosody (PY)
- Referent (RT)
- Sentence Boundary (SB)
- Spatial Structuring (SS)
- Time/Tense Indicator (TI)
- Verb Form (VF)
- Vocabulary (VO)

As previously indicated, these 20 features are not all inclusive of features that were observed or could have been used—they are just the most common. The LAT2 assessors added additional features as needed.

## EXAMPLE END NOTES

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At the end of each analysis, End Notes were used to provide a summary of findings, along with the implications for the interpreting process and recommendations for interpreters. What follows are some examples of the End Notes that appear in the language assessments:

### EXAMPLE #1:

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End Notes: This individual identifies as DeafBlind. She can follow the majority of the interview conducted at close distance with an interviewer. Her low vision may contribute to her comprehension of some of the questions and the need for frequent repetition of requests for details by the interviewer. In terms of the use of sign language, this individual uses short, brief responses to questions and typically only offers details upon further request and expansion by interviewer.

Grammar is inconsistent in that elements of sentence structure are often absent. Many expressions are comprised of only two to four signs, accompanied at times with gestures and a rich use of affect that contributes to the inference of additional meaning. Pronoun/referent forms are frequently absent. Word order is inconsistent with ASL syntax.

There is a pattern of the signer changing hand dominance. There doesn't appear to be a linguistic function or purpose to the changing of hand dominance, and it occurs randomly but frequently.

Signer frequently uses gesture/depiction and body language to communicate portions of her message. As a result, portions of her meaning may need to be inferred. Frequent check-in to confirm understanding and meaning will be important.

### EXAMPLE #2:

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Suggestions for interpreters: 1. Use short sentences--avoid complex sentence structure. When more complex sentences are being used, break them down into multiple short questions to elicit responses that in totality can respond to a more complex inquiry. 2. Check-in frequently with signer to confirm comprehension of her meaning--particularly for anything that you are inferring. 3. Be prepared to ask for specificity of responses. This may require multiple requests. 4. Ensure sufficient time is available to work through information that may need to be collected from the deaf individual. The process may be slow. 5. Manage your pace to allow you to be clear and deliberate as part of accommodating the consumer's low vision. 6. Consider consecutive interpreting to provide further time and to allow for checking in to confirm meaning prior to generating her responses into spoken English.

#### EXAMPLE #3:

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This signer discusses some of her life experiences related to school, work, and family. She exhibits a kernel grammatical structure in her use of sign language. The kernel structure is based on a series of three to four signs that establish some basic information--frequently void of pronouns or referents. In some instances, the kernel structure results in a series of expressions of thoughts that include two to three or three to four signs in a sequence.

Often expressions are repeated two or three times, particularly at the end of a thought. There is no grammatical function associated with the repetition that is evident through the analysis. Sign production is skewed on some signs but is a minor pattern in this sample. Otherwise, the signer is clear and deliberate in her production of signs.

Her use of NMM is inconsistent. For example, when using an RHQ as a prepositional bridge, there was no NMM included. However, NMMs were used to convey her strong dislike of changes that occurred at the school for the Deaf that led to her quitting and when indicating her extreme fatigue and body aches prior to quitting one of her jobs. Otherwise, NMM was limited in application.

Signer uses depiction to illustrate activities she has engaged in--such as her work duties in bagging groceries, or shopping for groceries, or caring for her dog. There is no evidence of her use of depiction to convey the actions of others/surrogates or to offer a generalized illustration of actions or conversations.

#### EXAMPLE #4:

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Suggestions for interpreters: 1. Use brief/short sentences. Convey information in short, basic statements. Restructure complex sentences into multiple kernel structures. 2. Slow down pace of signing--be deliberate and direct. 3. Check in frequently with deaf consumer--clarifying responses by repeating the information with a bit more detail to confirm inferences you may be making and to confirm your comprehension. 4. Monitor deaf consumer's responses to make sure the type of answers being given are consistent with what was asked. If not, ask the questions in smaller chunks of information--such as occurred in the interview related to the layout of the signer's bedroom. 5. Be prepared to use drawings, pictures, enactment/gesturing, depiction as strategies for making information as clear as possible. 6. Use consecutive interpretation.

#### EXAMPLE #5:

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End Notes: Signer uses incomplete ASL. Grammar is inconsistent both in terms of sentence structure and use of NMM to establish sentence types. Limited use of back-channeling to confirm understanding. Limited use of prosody. Interpreter team comprised of Deaf interpreter as lead is needed to catch the nuances of the signer's responses.

#### EXAMPLE #6:

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End Notes: It will be a true challenge to interpret for this consumer, even with DI support. He doesn't answer the questions directly--sometimes not at all. His responses are often incoherent and don't make sense. He uses the same phrases/messages repeatedly throughout the video. His signing is very fast. He couldn't answer questions unless the interviewer repeatedly and specifically asked the question in multiple ways. He responded based on what he thinks about the three videos (his personal opinions or experiences) versus what he saw on the videos (describing what he saw and what happened).

#### EXAMPLE #7:

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End Notes: Overall the consumer commands necessary vocabulary to communicate but lacks syntactic structure to identify subjects and/or objects. Constructed action and dialogue are her strong areas but again she lacks identification markers for subjects and objects. Prosody and cohesion are inconsistent. Suggest she work with an interpreting team comprised of a Deaf and hearing interpreter.

These remarks help to frame the overall assessment and to provide insight into how interpreters might adjust the strategies they use to better serve the linguistic and access needs of d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals who use atypical language.

## ASSESSMENT REVIEW

It is important to note that at least two members of the LAT2 reviewed and contributed to the language assessment of each of the 17 videos. There was a primary assessor assigned to each video and the review of videos was distributed across all of the LAT2 assessors. This helped to ensure accuracy of the assessment process and to provide opportunity for the addition of relevant comments that may have been missed by the primary assessor.

## LAT2 LANGUAGE ASSESSMENTS

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What follows is a summary of the assessment and review of each of the videos. The chart indicates the timecode for the portion of the interview, where the assessment was done, who conducted the initial assessment and who did the review. On average, the assessments ranged from 12-20 minutes (a few were longer) in length:

Video ID	Time Code for language assessment	Comments
BR-04	Beginning – 35:03 (assessment done on the entire 35:03 minutes).	Initial assessment: Vyron Kinson Reviewer: Stephanie Kay Vincent
BR-05	14:06 – 32:38 (18 minutes 32 seconds)	Initial assessment: Vyron Kinson Reviewer: MJ Bienvenu
BR-06	14:00 – 39:23 (25 minutes 23 seconds)	Initial Assessment: Stephanie Kay Vincent Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
CH-01	17:00 – 50:00 (33 minutes) <b>NOTE:</b> Challenging language sample–longest assessment	Initial Assessment: Stephanie Kay Vincent Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
CH-02	26:30 – 48:00 (21 minutes 30 seconds)	Initial Assessment: Vyron Kinson Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
CH-06	8:00 – 26:27 (18 minutes 23 seconds)	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
DC-4	11:55 – 27:00 (15. Minutes 5 seconds)	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis

Video ID	Time Code for language assessment	Comments
DC-10	9:28 – 30:31 (21 minutes 3 seconds)  <b>NOTE:</b> Some content deals with forced confinement, sexual assault, forced sex work, and may be a trigger for some individuals.	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu  Reviewer: Vyron Kinson
DI-3	10:00 – 23:00 (13 minutes)  <b>NOTE:</b> <i>Communicates almost entirely by gesture/depiction—limited formal sign language. Very interactive.</i>	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu  Reviewer: Program Coordinator
HD-6	6:49 – 21:19 (14 minutes 30 seconds)	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu  Reviewer: Stephanie Kay Vincent
HD-8	7:21 – 25:39 (18 minutes 18 seconds)	Initial Assessment: Stephanie Kay Vincent  Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
HK-2	5:00 – 17:00 (12 minutes)	Initial Assessment: April Jackson-Woodward  Reviewer: Stephanie Kay Vincent
HK-6	5:03 – 23:35 (18 minutes 32 seconds)	Initial Assessment: Stephanie Kay Vincent  Reviewer: MJ Bienvenu

Video ID	Time Code for language assessment	Comments
LC-1	Entire video—15:24 minutes	Initial Assessment: MJ Bienvenu Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis
LC-2	Entire video—14:57 minutes	Initial Assessment: Stephanie Kay Vincent Reviewer: Rosemary Wanis

## FINDINGS

Across the 17 assessments, there were a total of 2,199 feature markers and comments documented by the LAT2 assessors. The lowest number assigned to a single language sample was 61 and the highest was 238. There were six assessments that had between 61 and 99 feature markers and comments documented. There were eight assessments that had between 100 and 199 feature markers and comments documented. There were three assessments that had between 200 and 238 feature markers and comments documented. Most assessments had between 100 and 199 feature markers and comments. The mean across the 17 assessments was 129 feature markers and comments.

The variation in the number of observations documented by each assessor depended on a variety of factors: the amount of narration the d/Deaf or DeafBlind consumer generated during the portion of the interview that was assessed, the frequency and type of features that were present or absent in a specific language sample, the level of specificity documented by the individual LAT2 assessor and any variation in approach used by each assessor, among other possible variables.

The most frequently documented features used effectively by the d/Deaf and DeafBlind consumers were depiction (constructed action most often), fingerspelling and vocabulary. The most frequently documented errors or deviations in language use identified in the assessments related to pronouns, referents (subject-object), grammar (inclusive of kernel sentence structures of two to four signs and verb forms), cohesion, coherence and sign production. Notable in many of the assessments was that some portion of the message conveyed by the consumer contained sufficient deviation to be incomprehensible—even after attempts to clarify message meaning. In one instance, the overall message conveyed by the consumer was documented as being incomprehensible. Noted as being inconsistent or lacking were use of space, non-manual markers, use of classifiers and prosody.

The issue of incomprehensibility is an important finding in that it has significant implication for all the parties involved in an interpreted event. If the interpreters are unable to comprehend the message with sufficient accuracy and integrity, this reality must be disclosed to all of the parties involved in the interpreted event. Qualified, experienced, and appropriately trained interpreters (like members of the 2017 and 2021 LATs) should be accustomed to disclosing this type of information. Interpreters must first utilize all available and appropriate strategies and resources, including seeking assistance from those who may know the consumer and their language use more intimately. If, after doing so, they are unable to comprehend what is being communicated, disclosing this reality to all the parties involved in the interpreted event allows the opportunity for a collaborated resolution. The goals and outcomes of the event may have to be negotiated. This potential reality is one of the unfortunate implications of the language, education and social deprivation experienced by many of the consumers identified as using atypical sign language.

Interpreters should not be hesitant to let those relying on the interpretation know when things are not working as needed. Communication and language access is a collaborative process and determining how to address barriers that exist can and should occur through a collaborative process.

The observations by the LAT2 assessors are consistent with the observations of the 2017 LAT experts<sup>4</sup>. In particular, the lack of pronouns, referents, non-manual markers, and short/kernel sentence structures were underscored by both groups (see pages 6-7 of the 2017 LAT Report). There were no findings from the 2017 LAT work that were not also evidenced in the 2021 LAT2 findings.

One of the differences between the 2017 LAT findings and the 2021 LAT2 report is the focus on how the findings impact the work of interpreters. To that end, the most frequently documented recommendations for interpreters from the LAT2 language assessments were to work in Deaf-hearing interpreter teams with the Deaf interpreter taking the lead, using consecutive interpretation, slowing down the pace of signing and using short sentences/avoiding complex sentence structures. Less frequently documented was for interpreters to increase the use of depiction, props, drawing and visuals.

An important recommendation was to be sensitive to fatigue on the part of the consumers—particularly those with low vision or those who are DeafBlind. Because the interpreting process is typically extended when working in teams and with d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals who use atypical language, fatigue can set in much more frequently. As a result, the amount of information that can be gleaned from a single interaction may be less than desired according to the goal of the interaction (for example, in taking a family history).

## SUMMARY

Two goals were established for the LAT2. The first goal was to document the use of specific language features by d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals who were identified as using atypical sign language to identify patterns and the implications of the patterns for message meaning and comprehension. The second goal was to offer interpreter practitioners recommendations about how an individual's language use impacts the interpreting process and what strategies would be the most effective in providing interpreting services and language access to consumers who use atypical sign language. The overarching goal is to increase the ability of interpreters to adapt their language and interpreting strategies to meet the linguistic needs of a broader range of d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals.

The product produced by the LAT2 includes 17 assessments conducted on language samples from a diverse group of d/Deaf and DeafBlind individuals from three areas of the United States. This product will be shared with interpreter practitioners and interpreting educators for the purpose of increasing the

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that although the two groups viewed some of the same videos, they did not view all the same videos. The 2017 LAT viewed 30 videos and used two rubrics for documenting their observations, while the LAT2 viewed some portion of 17 videos. However, the LAT2 conducted a more detailed language assessment on the videos they viewed than did the 2017 LAT.

skills associated with interpreting for those members of the d/Deaf and DeafBlind communities who use atypical language.

This report addresses the general process and findings of the LAT2 language assessments. You can learn more about Northeastern University's Center for Atypical Language Interpreting (CALI) by visiting the website at <https://www.northeastern.edu/cali/>.