



PanSALB
PAN SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGE BOARD

SOUTH AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

SASL Indaba 20 23

SASL INDABA REPORT

DATE:
**09-10
MARCH**

VENUE:
PREMIER HOTEL
OR TAMBO,
KEMPTON PARK

“One nation many languages”

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BACKGROUND

The South African Sign Language (SASL) Indaba was held on 9 and 10 March 2023. It aimed to discuss the standardisation of SASL and map a way forward. Academic experts from universities that offer SASL as a module or service, as well as principals/teachers at Deaf schools, the SASL National Language

Body (NLB), independent SASL service providers, and government stakeholders of language were in attendance. In total, there were 125 people in attendance; unfortunately last minute requests to attend the Indaba could not be accommodated due to logistical constraints.



OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

The Chairperson of the Board Prof. Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst officially opened the event. She spoke to the beginnings and development of SASL in higher education. She commented that there was still a slow uptake of the language in academic domains, which was a pity as it marginalised and excluded large portions of the

population. She encouraged attendees in their work to promote, use, develop, and standardise the language so that the Deaf could gain better access to things such as the economy, education, and public services.

Following this, the project leader, Dr Sally Maepa detailed the purpose of the Indaba. She explained that SASL could be defined as a language and that, as seen with the adoption of Sign Languages as official languages across a number of countries, the

question of standardisation arose. She explained that standardisation was often done in relation to educational and professional domains. She noted that standardisation may be beneficial in creating a baseline for learners and workers. However, it could also exclude those who appear not to speak the “standardised” language; this could create fear in users and lead them to reject standardisation.

The establishment of a research consortium, which the attendees were now all part of, was created to offer wide-ranging advice on how to standardise SASL, since there were processes of standardisation that were not exclusionary. She explained that the 2023 SASL Indaba was the first meeting of the research consortium. The overarching goal of the consortium was the well-planned, equitable, and targeted standardisation of SASL. She explained that PanSALB and the SASL NLB had identified that a desired objective of the Indaba was the creation of an implementation plan that can be used as a model of best practice to be replicated throughout the country in various domains, including education and government.

However, PanSALB had recognised that they required several smaller steps to create an implementation plan and see the equitable standardisation of SASL. She explained that, in this meeting, they wished to establish the objectives of the consortium. In other words, PanSALB wished to leave with a clear sense of what this consortium would do in order to produce an implementation plan that would result in the equitable standardisation of SASL. This would be done by discussion about:

1. Standardisation processes: *Why is standardisation necessary? Principles for lexical selection*
2. Development of terminology: *How? Where? Who?*
3. Development of teaching and learning resources: *Including literature development*
4. What resources are required? *All forms of resources*

These discussions would pave the way to the following expected outcomes:

- The well-planned, equitable, and targeted standardisation of SASL.
- A SASL NLB technical committee with a clear programme, guidance, and direction as determined by the research consortium.



- A PanSALB strategy on SASL lexical standardisation and formalised grammatical structure.
- The delivery of a standardisation implementation plan for SASL as a model of best practice which can be implemented in various domains in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders and partners.

Executive Head: Languages, Mr Julius Dantile then gave feedback on PanSALB’s engagements in 2022 with research institutions and independent SASL service providers. He explained that they had met with the University of Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, the University of the Free State, North-West University, Durban University of Technology, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the University of Venda. During these discussions, challenges with and recommendations for the standardisation of SASL were recorded. The consultative findings included the need to create a platform for stakeholder engagement (which culminated in the 2023 SASL Indaba), as well as the development of and research into SASL linguistics, development and funding of SASL resources, regulation and development of SASL interpreting services, and upskilling of the Deaf in which a dynamic standardisation process would play an important role.

After Mr Dantile’s presentation, questions and answers were taken. Issues related to the meaning of standardisation, the necessity of standardisation, and the presence of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and universities from the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape were noted and addressed. Reiterations about the need for a standard in educational and professional domains for language use, development, standardised testing, and quality assurance were made in addition to explanations that standardisation would not mean the rejection of varieties or the control of SASL. It was clarified that the DBE were in attendance and that it was unfortunate that no universities in the Eastern Cape or Northern Cape offered SASL as a module or service and so they could not be included.

Following lunch, the attendees broke away into commissions. The commissions were randomly constituted and discussed all four issues listed above – the standardisation process, terminology development, teaching and learning resource development, and the resources needed. The commissions closed the proceedings of the first day. The commissions were chaired as followed:

Comm.	Facilitators	Scribe(s)
1	Mr Dirkie Ebeherson (NID) & Ms Zanele Ndima (DSAC)	Ms Nikiwe Matebula & Mr Jabulani Simelane
2	Ms Kirsty Maclons (SLED) & Ms Andiswa Gebashe (SASL NLB)	Mr Willie Manana
3	Mr Andries van Niekerk (Convo) & Ms Modiegi Njeyiana (SLED)	Ms Joyce Madiba
4	Prof. Anne Baker (SU) & Ms Atiyah Asmal (SASL NLB)	Mr Lufuno Ndlovu

Day two started with opening remarks by Mr Dantile in which he stressed that standardisation did not mean the language would be diminished or signs discarded, but rather related to creating a standard to be used in education and formal arenas. This would have a ripple effect in building up the language, particularly in relation to capacitating teachers and students as well as SASL service providers such as interpreters and frontline workers.

Guest speaker, Ms Phuti Mabelebele from the Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities explained that the department had a mandate to regulate government through policies and legislation that promote the inclusion of women, youth, and people with disabilities as well as good service delivery to these groups. She explained that the department had been working on the Disability Rights Bill. She admitted that they had not implemented the set targets of the White Paper on the Rights of People with Disabilities as well as they had planned, and so they had been working to revise their implementation plans and had thus developed frameworks for Universal Design and Access, Reasonable Accommodation, Disability Awareness, and Self-Determination, in line with their mandate, as guiding documents. They had also been hosting disability inclusion training with the National School of Governance.

In terms of SASL, she reported that they were awaiting the imminent announcement that SASL had become an official language. She noted that of particular importance was readying ourselves for that announcement to ensure that by the time the announcement is made, SASL could be easily included. She advised that programmes should be started at

a grassroots level so that they could advance upwards toward national implementation. She reported that progress had been made with the Department of Education in implementing SASL and other communication accessibility tools at inclusive and mainstream schools. This would allow people with disabilities to be integrated and have a place in the broader South Africa. She reported that they already had groups assisting educators with inclusive education programmes and collaborations so that they were familiarised with SASL. She commented that SASL must be made available in all arenas of society. She noted that SASL interpreters were an area that needed improvement, in addition to education, but she commented that there had been progress in this regard in South African courts since the Department of Justice were also aware of the gaps poor interpretation caused in court cases and were therefore actively working against it. She reiterated that her department's work was not in isolation; they worked with expert individuals and organisations to implement their mandate. She motivated all to work together too.

Following this, rapporteurs from each of the four commissions then presented their findings and outcomes of the previous day's discussions. Dr Kate Huddleston, an expert in SASL linguistics, provided the resolutions and way forward after considering the more common findings of the commissions in relation to her expertise. At the conclusion of the Indaba, attendees were issued with a qualitative survey to assess their thoughts about standardisation and the standardisation process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion below are highlights drawn from the anonymous answers of the questionnaires circulated to attendees, the commissions' reports, and the resolutions and way forward presented by Dr Huddleston. Although 125 delegates attended, only a total of 68 surveys were completed. Following the Indaba, the qualitative comments were analysed to identify broad themes and specific ideas. The frequency of each specific idea identified was counted and key data was produced. The data collected and resolutions and way forward by Dr Huddleston present an emerging plan of action for PanSALB and other language stakeholders.

In terms indicating functional area, close to 28% of respondents chose not to answer, but it is known from the guest list that they would have been a SASL NLB member, Deaf

teacher / principal at a Deaf school, interpreter, academic, independent service provider, member of an NGO/NPOs, or member of government or PanSALB staff. However, it is also known from the guest list that those that indicated that they were interpreters were interpreters in addition to at least one other category since interpreters were not specifically invited to attend. This seems to be an oversight that needs to be remedied at the next Indaba as interpreters are valuable contributors to this debate as professional users of SASL.

Also important to note is that 13% of respondents indicated that they fell into one or more categories, suggesting some attendees had intersecting and well-rounded understandings specifically of SASL use. Additionally, the two functional areas with highest attendance in terms of respondents were academics (25%) and teachers from Deaf schools (23.5%). This suggests that the advice offered in this document is well-informed in terms of primary/secondary and tertiary education. It is a pity that data



indicating placement in primary and secondary education was not recorded. Still, since education is one of the primary arenas standardisation will impact, the advice provided on education specifically can be seen as realistic and insightful.

In terms of understandings of standardisation, these were debated at length during commissions and during question and answer sessions with the full group of attendees. There was some marked resistance to standardisation expressed by Deaf attendees in particular, who took it as an attempt by the hearing to reduce and/or control the language. Interesting then are the responses given individually: answers related to understanding what standardisation was tended to be broad and neutral prior to the Indaba.

Of the responses 20.6% indicated that they understood standardisation to simply mean creating some form of standard that was common and consistent. Smaller amounts of respondents suggested definitions with positive slants:

- 3% indicated that standardisation would allow varieties to be kept,
- 4.4% indicated that it would allow for the development of SASL,
- 4.4% indicated that it would allow better access to and for the language, and
- 3% indicated that it would allow SASL to be on the same level as other languages.

In terms of undesired perceptions:

- 8.8% suggested that it meant that one sign per word would be chosen and that that sign alone would have to be used by all SASL users.
- Only 1.4% indicated that it seemed to be a divisive process, that it would

narrow down varieties, and that SASL did not need it.

Prior to the Indaba:

- 16.1% indicated that they did not know what standardisation was.
- Important to note is that a separate 16.1% did not answer the question or offer a relevant answer, which could suggest up to 32% of responders did not understand what was meant by standardisation before the Indaba.

Post-Indaba:

- The number of respondents who were still unsure of what standardisation meant shrunk to 10.3% while non-responses remained constant at 16.1%.
- 35% of respondents indicated that their understanding of standardisation had remained the same, and an analysis of the qualitative data showed that this consistency related largely to those who already had a neutral to positive understanding of standardisation.
- 8.8% of respondents indicated that standardisation will allow SASL to be on the same level as other languages, which was up by over 5%.
- 8.8% indicated that they now understood that it would not reject varieties in SASL, also up approximately 5%.
- 13.2% now understood that it was a process for formal contexts like education, government and interpreting, up by 8%; and
- 7.3% indicated that they now understood that it would particularly benefit education.

No overtly negative comments were noted in the responses related to respondents'



understanding of standardisation post-event, and no comments suggested that respondents thought that standardisation would mean one sign per word would have to be used by all. New descriptors such as that it was a “research-based process” and that it “describes a lexicon” occurred for the first time; however, these more technical understandings were still limited and mostly suggested by those that identified as an academic.

Overall, responses post-Indaba tended to still be quite broad and diverse. Since the questions asked were open-ended, there was little control for variety, however, **an analysis of the qualitative data suggests that while there was some improvement in understanding or a slight movement to a more homogenous definition, technical understandings of the scientific process of standardisation were lacking among respondents.** This is an issue highlighted by Dr Huddlestone in her presentation.

It is recommended that PanSALB work with linguistic experts to produce an explanatory document in plain English and SASL to explain the scientific process of standardising a language and circulate it well before the next Indaba. This will aid the Deaf and other stakeholders in SASL to do away with negative misconceptions about the activity and focus on providing steps to standardise the language, rather than debating if it is necessary.

An understanding of what standardisation is has a trickle-down effect on understandings of how standardisation should be approached. There was large variety in the answers offered. Most dominant was that it had to be done through consultation with stakeholders. Of the responses:

- **10.3% indicated that consultations should be done specifically with experts (who were, preferably, also Deaf),**
- **19.1% indicated that consultations**

- **should be done specifically with the Deaf, even if they were not linguists,**
- **3% indicated that consultations should specifically be done with teachers of the Deaf, and**
- **28% indicated that consultations should be done with all stakeholders.**

This drive to prioritise consultations **shows the desire for an inclusive, bottom-up process**, as noted by Dr Huddlestone, so that everyone feels heard. This was further embellished with recommendations that **the process be driven by the Deaf community (4.4%), be inclusive of all dialects (5.9%), be driven by provincial committees that report upwards to a national committee (5.9%), or that a standardisation committee in any form be instituted (4.4%)**. Upon this strong recommendation, **this report has been circulated to attendees as the start of a consultation process that will sharpen the focus for the year's work leading up to the 2024 Indaba and the 2024 Indaba's programme and desired outcomes.**

Another strong directive was issued for a **“natural standardisation process”**. Prof. Anne Baker, another SASL linguistic expert, in her commission report noted that natural standardisation is already at play with SASL, with SASL varieties naturally decreasing over the last decade with the introduction and/or development of social media, broadcast media, and video communications. Natural standardisation is a process common to South African English where the language is not prescribed by an authority but described by lexicographers. In creating a dictionary or lexicon, lexicographers scientifically study words or signs in accordance with the

frequency of use, distribution, and contexts. This approach is sensitive to the users of a language as the naturally most-preferred sign is perceived as the standard, but varieties of the sign are also recorded and described in the dictionary, and used in a variety of contexts. If this sensitive approach is to be used for SASL, this strongly advocates for the urgent creation of an SASL NLU, a recommendation also noted by Dr Huddlestone.

A third strong instruction from 10.3% respondents was that standardisation should be researched further before any plans are made to actually select standardised words. This could relate to respondents' confusion or concerns about what standardisation actually is, but could also reflect the desire for a scientific and well-thought-out process. This is argued in more detail by responders' suggestions that standardisation of SASL be a scientific process (5.9%) and a process based on existing case studies (1.5%). A last, small detail that is interesting to note is that only one respondent indicated that the standardisation of SASL is urgent whereas three indicated that it should be slow and steady.

There is not a clear way forward in terms of the standardisation process to follow, possibly because further time should be dedicated to discussions around this particular issue and that attendees of the Indaba should be well-informed prior to the next Indaba of various ways of standardising a language, existing case studies, and current South African experts and activists in this particular research area. This will also allow them to make a decision on whether they would like to nominate a steering

committee, how the committee would be structured, and who would sit on the various committees. It is necessary here to point out that PanSALB has already undertaken consultations with experts and SASL service providers and consults quarterly with the SASL NLB who are nominated to represent the Deaf. Expansive consultations should be started by PanSALB in the next year, if found necessary, or by a steering committee at a point closer to the actual selection of the SASL lexicon. Alternatively, the distribution of this report could serve as the start of an expansive consultation process that will define the work to be done over the next year and the focus of the next SASL Indaba.

Further, the point of the Indaba is to consult with a wide variety of stakeholders on the matter. Public comments would have to be handled outside of a mass, physical forum. **Thus, a further suggested recommendation is the compilation of research, case studies, and profiles in a single document that is distributed to attendees well before the next event, so that attendees can arrive well-informed and able to suggest more concrete steps with regard to the specific process.** This document would have to be summarised or annotated in plain English and SASL for ease of understanding.

In terms of the role of PanSALB in standardising SASL, **over 32% of respondents indicated that they thought PanSALB should lead, facilitate, or coordinate the process.** While leading can



be seen as different to facilitating and co-ordinating, it is clear that many perceive PanSALB to be the most important authority in the process. This is a fair assessment since PanSALB is mandated to create the conditions for the use and development of languages. With such a wide variety of stakeholders, it also makes sense that respondents would look for a national, central connection point that distributes information and collects feedback. This is reflected in the demand by 17.7% of respondents that PanSALB bring stakeholders together. PanSALB has further identified itself as the co-ordinator of the standardisation effort by hosting the Indaba and initiating discussions around SASL standardisation. The search for a leader or coordinator is reinforced by the fact that far fewer responders suggested a conditional or complementary role for PanSALB in standardising SASL: Only 7.3% suggested that PanSALB's role is to advise on the process to be adopted and only 5.9% suggested that they had to support the process through the SASL NLB. **It is recommended that PanSALB continues with coordinating these efforts as the independent constitutional body mandated to do so, while ensuring that the demand for leadership is not extended to the demand that PanSALB "make the final decision"; the final decision should lie with the Deaf in collaboration with linguistic experts and other language stakeholders.**

Responses varied considerably regarding PanSALB's most important task following the Indaba. Responses included creating a steering committee (13%), doing research (10.3%), hosting consultations (10.3%), continuing to host Indabas (8.8%), developing a plan of action based on the commissions' advice (8.8%), and

implementing the plan of action (7.4%). The lack of a dominant answer reflects that these first discussions tended to map big ideas rather than specific ways forward. Practically, the development of a plan of action, such is the one presented in the next section, is the most practical way forward in line with the data collected. This plan of action includes the collection (not the production) of research to share with attendees of the next Indaba, which in itself, will allow for consultations and more concrete ideas on the way forward. Further important suggestions that were only nominally suggested was the monitoring of the implementation plan (3%), the hosting of a central hub for resources and consultation processes (6%), and enabling technology (4.4%). These suggestions are important since they will ensure actual progress is made and that the impetus started by this first Indaba is maintained. As explained by Dr Huddleston, an independent central hub is needed for SASL professionals as well as SASL users. Resources (shared lexicon, terminology, teaching & learning material) have been developed by organisations like SLED and Handlab but need to be centrally available. They also need to be free, but this can only be achieved if they are funded, possibly by the Departments of Sports, Art, and Culture or Education.

Feedback on the Indaba itself and requests for future Indabas showed that:

- **61.8% made positive remarks about the event while 17.7% indicated challenges.**
- Many commented that they were happy with how many Deaf people were invited, how Deaf people were included in the programme, and that the programme was interesting and insightful.


When asked what they wished to see at the next Indaba, responses varied largely, however, there was a sense that some form of progress should have been made (7.4%) and, even more clearly, that attendees were expecting a report back on the developments since the 2023 Indaba (25%). Other common responses included more (Deaf) linguists (13.2%) as attendees and on the programme, more discussion about steps for implementation rather than debate about the necessity of standardisation (13.2%), presentations on data and evidence from research conducted about standardisation (10.3%) and a longer event to allow for more discussion (10.3%). Realistically, PanSALB will, in the next year before the 2024 Indaba,

be able to collate and distribute research, case studies, and expert profiles about standardisation so that the programme can relate strongly to debating the process of standardisation to be implemented. This will allow a sense of progress and a movement away from circular debate about the necessity of standardising SASL. That being said, this debate was not fruitless or redundant. When asked what stood out about the event, the most common responses were the variety of background and viewpoints represented in the discussions (13.2%) and the discourse and debate itself (10.3%). Additionally, the demand for more linguistic experts can be sated by circulating the profiles of SASL academics present.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIMELINE

Recommendation	Actioner	Deadline
Circulation of report based on findings above	PanSALB	June 2023
Plain English and SASL research report that explains the scientific process of standardisation and includes relevant research articles, case studies, and expert and institutional profiles.	PanSALB in collaboration with linguistic experts (creation) PanSALB via attendance register and partnerships (distribution)	3-6 months prior to 2024 Indaba
2 nd SASL Indaba and include interpreters as invitees at next Indaba	PanSALB	March 2024
Investigation into hosting a central resource hub for resources, public consultation, etc.	PanSALB	Long-term

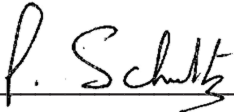
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