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International Sign: A Practical kit

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Abstract: Sign languages exist throughout the world's societies with varying degrees of acceptance and recognition. To be more specific, the recognition of sign languages as official languages is one of the major concerns of many Deaf communities all over the world. Luckily, in many countries the fight reached the goal and sign languages got some degree of recognition, promotion and support at different levels of the social and civil life. There is no a standard pathway in which such a recognition can be legally included within national legal frameworks. While in some countries the national sign language is an official state language, in others is a minority language, and somewhere else has a protected status in certain areas, such as education or access to public services. In fact, a wide variety of issues related to deaf people demands attention. While Deaf community organizations in Western countries advocate for bilingual education for deaf children, in many other areas of the world, deaf people do not have access to any school whatsoever. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) estimates over 80% of deaf children do not have access to education (World Federation of the Deaf, n.d.). These negative facts led our research team to design a multilingual e-book, open to everyone; Deaf and hearing persons, from any country: the "International Sign: A Practical Kit". In this article, we describe the structure of the first digital practical kit of International Sign (IS), as an informal instrument of teaching IS, whose objective is to demolish the misconceptions about Deaf and Deaf culture and to outline the four "basic factors for human rights of deaf people." These are: a) "Recognition and use of sign language(s), including recognition of and respect for Deaf culture and identity b) Bilingual education in sign language(s) and the national language(s) c) Accessibility to all areas of society and life, including legislation to secure equal citizenship for all and prevent discrimination d) Sign Language interpretation." (Haualand and Allen, 2009:9). To conclude, our final objective is, through the diffusion and the spread of the International Sign: A Practical Kit, to abolish linguistic barriers through the Deaf communities and create new job opportunities for this specific target group, using this e-book as a pilot for the creation of a social enterprise of digital editions concerning Deaf Culture directed by Deaf.

Keywords: practical kit, international sign (IS), social entrepreneurship, deaf, e-book

1. Introduction

International Sign (henceforth IS) is a communication mode that is used widely in the international Deaf Community. Moody (1989), Hiddinga and Crasborn (2011) point the fact that IS is a signed communication between Deaf people who need to communicate but do not share a common sign language. According to findings, IS is both influenced by naturally evolved sign languages used in grown Deaf communities (henceforth SLs) and bases heavily on iconic, universal structures.

Despite the widespread myth that sign language is universal, national sign languages evolved separately, often with minimal contact with other sign languages. Early accounts of Deaf persons using an international gestural communication date from the 19th century in Europe (International Sign Interpreter Recognition Interim Policy and Guidelines). Today, though it varies greatly from one context to another, IS has begun to become, even partially, more standardized when used in a formal context, through frequent international meetings of the World Federation of the Deaf, Deaflympics, the UN conferences, UN Committee sessions related to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and other events. This standardization has been achieved because of the fact that IS continues to develop from a simplistic iconic system into a more conventionalized system with increasingly complex rules (Rosenstock, 2004). As far as its functional and social characteristics are concerned, it has these of a pidgin (Emmorey and Reilly, 1995). That is the reason why we can suggest that it has the structure of a contact language but in comparison with the other languages it is the only that has been developed entirely between and among signed languages and so it is not based on spoken language contact situations.

Despite its history as an international contact language between signed languages, its users consider IS incomplete and limited as compared to their native sign languages. Even if we accept this consideration, we cannot overlook the fact that while the majority of pidgins is syntactically relatively poor, IS exploits many grammatical features that seem to be common among most sign languages (use of space, directionality, personification and a kind of mime on the hands), so that it is theorized to be more like a language than other pidgins.

Studies on international communication in sign language and interpreting in international meetings and events have revealed that grammatical features of IS are extremely complex and use the same structures that natural sign languages share (Allsop, Woll & Brauti 1994; Webb & Supalla 1994; McKee and Napier 2002; Rosenstock 2004). But as yet, there is little research on the use of IS for the purpose of promoting a “lingua franca” among the Deaf Community, not only for purposes of facilitating the interpreting to Deaf audiences of diverse origins at international conferences, but also for strengthening the independence and the equity of deaf persons living and acting in a global “speaking” society.

This article presents the first attempt of validating the IS as “lingua franca” among the international Deaf Community through the creation of the “International Sign Language Practical Kit”. This practical kit, designed in the form of a multilingual e-book, is divided into thematic chapters and the grammar structure of IS is shown through examples of some easy sentences. Moreover, two of its principal aims are to demolish the misconceptions about Deaf and Deaf culture and to outline the four “basic factors for human rights of deaf people.” These are: a) “Recognition and use of sign language(s), including recognition of and respect for Deaf culture and identity b) Bilingual education in sign language(s) and the national language(s) c) Accessibility to all areas of society and life, including legislation to secure equal citizenship for all and prevent discrimination d) Sign Language interpretation.” (Haualand and Allen, 2009:9).

The whole description of the practical kit will contribute to an understanding of the strategies used by Deaf people in order through the social entrepreneurship to ensure and reinforce their right for work and professional recognition. We contend that this understanding also has a relevance to the diffusion of social entrepreneurship generally.

To put this study in context, we will first give a brief synopsis of the status of SLs, the historical evolution of the IS and an overview of research on socially vulnerable groups, and specifically Deaf communities, and their engagement in social entrepreneurship.

2. Sign languages: Nature, status and legal recognition

Sign languages and their users are usually ignored in the context of language policy (De Meulder, 2015). Currently about thirty-one countries (the most of them are European Union member states) have recognized their sign language(s) in legislation on language status and/or language rights. This is the outcome of Deaf communities’ demand for explicit, legal recognition of their languages, often in relation to already existing implicit recognition. The explicit recognition is an inalienable right because it can make implicit recognition work, strengthen it, or supplement it.

To be more specific, the European Union of the Deaf, the Brussels-based federation of associations of the Deaf, has recently published a detailed report on the varied legal statuses that sign languages have in the continent. The volume, edited by Mark Wheatley and Annika Pabsch, is titled “Sign Language legislation in the European Union” and consists of two sections. The first section is a summary for each country member of the Union, with the description of the status of sign language in that country. In the second section, in the form of an appendix, are full reported in the original language the laws and the legal orders that deal with the topic. The picture that emerges is of a continent that, despite its diversity, has mostly opted for forms of recognition of sign languages as the language of a minority of the population. Thus, we can group European countries in three categories. There are three countries that mention and recognize sign language in their Constitutions: Austria, Finland and Portugal. Then there are the countries, and they are the majority, which have specific laws for the recognition of sign language: Belgium (two languages: Wallonia Sign Language and Flemish Sign Language, with two different legislative acts), Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (two languages: Spanish Sign Language and Catalan Sign Language), Sweden and Hungary. Then there are the countries where there is no official recognition, although it is allowed and

guaranteed a certain level of use by other legislative acts: Denmark, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland and Bulgaria.

By consequence, these recognition laws are very diverse in nature and scope (De Meulder, 2015). In contrast to the majority of the recognized minority languages, sign languages do not always receive national, official, or minority status. In fact, such laws do not lead to official minority status. Additionally the dual category membership of deaf people as both persons with a disability and members of culturo-linguistic minority groups, policymakers actually categorizes deaf and sign language issues (only) in disability. This parameter describes not only their profound misapprehension of the nature of deaf people's languages and cultures but also a certain inability of Deaf communities to clarify and communicate their demands in a way that policymakers conceive and can work with. Moreover, existing recognition laws focus omit the cultural recognition of SLs. Without trying to underestimate the importance of language recognition in any way, this focus on language alone has often disinclined policymakers from visualizing the full legal picture of recognition, including Deaf communities' claims to appreciation of their distinct cultures and identities (De Meulder, 2015).

2.1 The status of Italian sign language: A "sign language without official recognition"

As highlighted by the report published by the European Union of the Deaf, in Italy there is no official recognition of Italian Sign Language (henceforth LIS) at national level. Nevertheless, some regions officially recognize LIS, albeit with different nuances: Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Piemonte, Sicilia and Valle d'Aosta approved Regional Laws. All these local authorities, plus some municipalities and provinces, have issued acts of recognition and promotion of sign language in their areas of competence. Moreover, in Italy, a number of laws and administrative regulations mention sign language and ensure the right of its use, even in the absence of formal national recognition.

One of the most important areas expressly addressed by law is the use in universities and education in general. The Italian disability act (Law n.104/1992), declares for example the right for deaf students enrolled in university to benefit from sign language interpreting services during lectures. Furthermore, they have the right to be assisted by a sign language interpreter during examinations and during the final discussion of their thesis. Similar rights are also guaranteed in relation to other moments of the civil life: deaf individuals are entitled to receive support from an interpreter during selection processes to civil servant positions, driving license examinations, in the law court, and in the employment offices. Nevertheless, the availability of interpreters in other public services, such as hospitals and social services, is not well structured and mostly depends on the sensitivity of local managers. Bilingual education is allowed in schools, when required by families, and sign language can be a subject in universities: there are LIS courses in the universities of Milan, Rome, Venice, Bologna, Parma and Brescia.

We can therefore conclude that in Italy there is a certain degree of unofficial recognition of sign language, which is accepted and used in various fields, although in an incoherent, partial and incomplete way. What is seriously missing is a specific public and official recognition of LIS as a language, paving the way for a cultural revolution in the ideas and prejudices that society has about sign language and the Deaf community.

3. International Sign: An historical perspective

The term International Sign (IS) is used for the visual communication between deaf persons of different nationalities who do not have a shared sign language. To be more specific, according to Rosenstock (2004) the functional properties of IS prevail over specific structural features. Within a global environment of empathy, social inclusion and equity deaf people should be able to communicate "across national boundaries," be it with more or less effort depending on various contextual factors, likely including the "distance" between the sign languages and pre-existing knowledge of each other's language and of the subject of conversation (Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011: 492). Rosenstock suggests that IS cannot be labeled "a language, pidgin, Creole or koine, ... it is a communication system with the purpose to convey meaning, be it by a presenter or through an interpreter" (2004:50).

Actually, the history of IS emerges from attempts to formalize and standardize international Deaf contact communication (McKee and Napier, 2002). In the 1970s, while signed languages were becoming recognized as indigenous distinct systems, a need was also emerged for a standardized international sign system to enforce formal communication when deaf people met at international conferences. This exigency led to the formation

of a commission of the World Federation of the Deaf (henceforth WFD) with the charge of creating an international language for deaf persons to use, which resulted in publication of the “Gestuno” photographic lexicon (British Deaf Association, 1975). Gestuno was formed by selecting “naturally spontaneous and easy signs in common use by deaf people of different countries (British Deaf Association, 1975:2). The invention of this lexicon has not achieved the complete standardization of the improvised international pidgin used by deaf persons with each other. Nor has it completely formalized the signs used by IS interpreters, since the lexical demands of many interpreting situations surpass the scope of the Gestuno lexicon (McKee and Napier, 2002).

IS interpretation was offered for the first time at a WFD organized conference in 1977. After this first attempt, the following ones were characterized as controversial and did not satisfied the deaf audiences (Scott Gibson and Ojala, 1994).

Deaf people report different levels of satisfaction about the nature and value of IS. Some point out that it cannot be taken seriously, arguing that one cannot reach any depth in the interaction if one cannot use a true sign language. For many deaf people, however, IS represents a fruitful means of interaction in language-contact situations. Additionally, “its mere possibility proves to them the visual and communicative strength and creativity that all members of deaf communities possess” (Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011: 493).

Although opinions of deaf people on the efficacy and communicative depth of IS diverge, time and again it appears to come about spontaneously and to be a possible mode of effective interaction (Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011). Although we do not want to define international sign in terms of structural features, research done in this area shows that some characteristics are present in all different exchanges. Iconic or shared lexical items from the source languages are combined with mouth articulations of spoken words, pointing to objects in the immediate environment, and pantomime (McKee & Napier 2002; Rosenstock 2004).

Taking into consideration the current developments in globalization and the growth of Internet technologies, we have to consider that a form of IS will indeed develop into something more standard and systematic than what we currently witness at international meetings or even at brief tourist meetings and workshops. While American Sign Language (henceforth ASL) had a dominant role among higher-educated deaf persons because of international participation in higher education at institutes like Gallaudet University and the Rochester Technical Institute for the Deaf, the use of webcams and Internet annihilating long distance and facilitating communication may well limit the relative dominance of ASL world-wide in the coming decades (Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011).

4. Socially vulnerable groups and social entrepreneurship

Fabio Rosso, the main responsible for the innovative system for delivering electricity to people in rural Brazil, when he was once asked why he did what he did, answered: “I am trying to build a little part of the world in which I would like to live” (Bornstein, 2007: 239). Actually, Rosso represents the supporters of a sustainable philosophy which promotes both innovation and entrepreneurship within an organizational set up (Thompson & Doherty, 2006). As a result, today social entrepreneurship has become one of the major approaches related strongly to societal development and empowerment (Kummitha and Majumdar, 2015: 260).

Social entrepreneurship focuses on detecting social problems, addressing them with innovative approaches, using entrepreneurial methods to make long lasting, sustainable and impactful solutions (Mulgan, 2007, in Kummitha and Majumdar, 2015). Social entrepreneurs initiate social ventures that work with communities which are affected by social problems or by social exclusion, such as socially vulnerable groups¹ and more specifically the members of Deaf Community (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008, in Kummitha and Majumdar, 2015: 260).

In that way, entrepreneurship is considered as a means for employability (Kakouris and Georgiadis, 2016). Taking into consideration the fact that nowadays, education policy increasingly encourages a view of education that has as its main purpose the promotion of a knowledge economy (Peters, 2001), where earning power is related

¹ A socially vulnerable group is a population that has some specific characteristics that make it at higher risk of falling into poverty than others living in areas targeted by a project. Socially vulnerable groups include the elderly, the mentally and physically disabled, at-risk children and youth, ex-combatants, internally displaced people and returning refugees, HIV/AIDS- affected individuals and households, religious and ethnic minorities and, in some societies, women. Definition retrieved by World Bank, <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALPROTECTION/EXTSF/0,,contentMDK:20663797~menuPK:6344572~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:396378,00.html>> [Accessed 14 Apr. 2016].

to knowledge management, a common goal of worldwide educational agencies is to inculcate, through entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial stimulus or orientation to graduates (Kakouris and Georgiadis, 2016). The main European Union legislative changes, projects and programs related to entrepreneurship education represented a new challenge for performant educational systems for disabled persons and generally socially vulnerable groups, as it attempted to create a strong support for their evolution as adults and citizens (Vilcov and Dimitrescu, 2015). Thus, through the diffusion and the spread of the International Sign: A Practical Kit, we tend not only to abolish linguistic barriers through the Deaf communities, but also to create new job opportunities for this specific target group, using this e-book as a pilot for the creation of a social enterprise of digital editions concerning Deaf Culture directed by Deaf.

5. International Sign's e-book

Traditionally the views of people with disabilities have been ignored and it is now acknowledged that without increased involvement there will be a significant gap in terms of social inclusion and professional opportunities (Ware, 2004, in Jackson, Cavenagh and Clibbens, 2014).

By creating this practical kit and in fact by giving voice to the perceptions of Deaf persons about the widespread use of IS, we attempt to reveal those ideas and practices that, suitably adapted, could contribute to the re-organization of vocational programmes for Deaf adults or to the implementation of new ones that are going to facilitate their learning and to ensure them with more professional opportunities.

To be more specific, taking seriously all the opinions of the representatives of the Deaf Community in Turin, we tried to design an IS practical kit in a form of a multilingual e-book, open to everyone; deaf and hearing persons. A big part of this work was conducted by Deaf teachers and technicians, under the academic framework of the University of Turin and Montpellier and thanks to the valuable recommendations of the social workers of the Turin Institute for the Deaf². In that way, this kit did not only create fifteen job positions for the members of the local deaf community, but also enforced all the participants with the necessary knowledge and experience for founding a social enterprise.

We decided to design the IS practical kit in a form of an e-book, because the last shares some characteristics with sign languages: it is visual, dynamic, innovative, interactive, always up-to-date, so it can be a great tool in order to learn this kind of languages and it is accessible from every aspect because it is suitable for everyone and really economic. In addition, after extracting the fact that the majority of the deaf citizens in Turin obtain a good knowledge of ICT, through this project, we aimed to reinforce them with new skills. Thus the Deaf persons involved in the project participated in informal vocational courses of designing e-books.

According to Higgs (1979) and (1964), the history of teaching language to the Deaf is quite recent. For that reason, regarding the methodology used, while designing the e-book, we tried to combine more than one approaches to language teaching: a) the Reading Approach (Reading was viewed as the most usable skill to have in a foreign language since ordinary people traveled abroad around 1930; also, few teachers could use a foreign language well enough to use a direct approach in class); b) the Cognitive Approach (language learning is viewed as rule acquisition, not habit formation and the instruction is often individualized; learners are responsible for their own learning); c) the Comprehension-Based Approach (an outgrowth of research in first language acquisition, which led some language methodologists to assume that second or foreign language learning is very similar to first language acquisition) and d) the Communicative Approach (according to which it is assumed that the goal of language teaching is learner ability to communicate in the target language and the content of a language course will include semantic notions and social functions, not just linguistic structures).

Thus the structure of the kit is divided in 3 main categories: 1) Tips that help the user to communicate with a deaf person (Figure 1), b) True or False, an interactive part of the e-book, in which the user must respond to 6 questions concerning the Deaf culture (Comprehension-Based and Communicative Approach) (Figure 2), c) Index, in which the user could watch some educational videos with examples of IS grammar structure and sentences (Reading and Cognitive Approach) (Figure 3&4).

² <<http://www.istitutosorditorino.org/>>[Accessed 14 Apr. 2016].

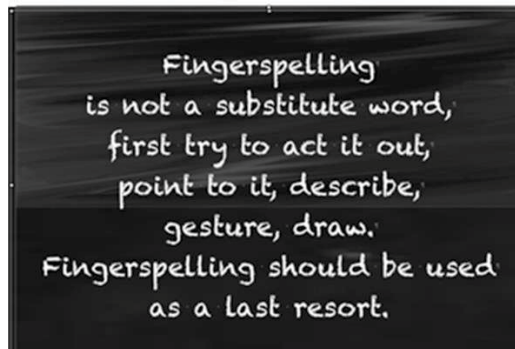


Figure 1: Tips that help the user to communicate with a deaf person



Figure 2: An interactive part of the e-book



Figure 3: Educational videos with examples of IS grammar structure and sentences



Figure 4: Educational videos with examples of IS grammar structure and sentences

6. Discussion

Social and economic changes can lead to changes in the roles played by various languages. For the coming decades, we expect to witness especially interesting changes in the roles played by different languages in Deaf communities, induced by rapidly increasing education level and increasing international contacts in deaf communities, by the rising status of sign languages both inside and outside deaf communities, and by the endlessly evolving medical technologies such as cochlear implants (Johnston, 2004).

Some scholars concern about the future existence of sign languages under these growing pressures on deaf communities to associate with the hearing world (Johnston, 2004). In that respect, it is interesting to observe how Deaf-studies scholars have initiated to explore the positive experiences of Deafness in a different way than before. Instead of concentrating in the use of signed language as an attribute of members of the community, in more recent work the “visuality” of Deaf people is emphasized (Bahan, 2008). Naturally, the visual-spatial modality of signed languages is intimately referred to this quality, but there is more to it. The centrality of seeing in this notion of ‘visual people’ attempts to do justice to the structural possibilities Deaf people have to experience and express meaning in space (Bahan, 2008).

Whatever the choices of Deaf people are going to be, in our opinion, the possibility of IS demonstrates the unique potential of Deaf people to abolish community gaps and cross language boundaries in a way unseen and unknown in spoken languages. In that sense, Deaf people can be part of a substantial global community, and IS, however differentiating it may be, can be its global way of contact. This situation opens up a wide range of questions for further research that have not been addressed so far in various fields, ranging from its entrepreneurial potential to psychosocial impact on national Deaf communities and to its (socio)linguistic characteristics.

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