

# ECML 25th Anniversary Conference

## Special Session: Protecting and Promoting Sign Languages in Europe

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Rapporteur

### Panel: Sign languages in Europe

*Chair: Michael Remmert, Head of Education Policy Division, Council of Europe*

On behalf of the Education Policy Division of the Council of Europe and the ECML, Michael Remmert welcomed participants to the special session. The inclusion of sign languages in the *CEFR Companion Volume (CV)* marks an important advance in the Council of Europe's work in language education, and the special session gives participants the opportunity to explore the implications of the CV for Deaf communities and the teaching and learning of sign languages.

### ***The right to use sign languages is a basic human right***

*Markku Jokinen, President of the European Union of the Deaf*

More than one per cent of the world's population are Deaf, and there are about one million Deaf people living in Council of Europe member states. Most Deaf people have a sign language as their mother tongue. Barriers to communication often mean that they are excluded from society and discriminated against. The widespread tendency to treat deafness as a disability overlooks the fact that sign languages are natural languages, with the same structural complexity and expressive potential as spoken languages. Deaf communities are linguistic minorities with rich cultures, and they have the same rights as other linguistic minorities.

In 2003 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1598 on the protection of sign languages. Much has been achieved in the intervening years, but the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages does not mention sign languages, and Deaf people still encounter barriers to the use of their language. Not all Council of Europe member states have granted official recognition to sign languages; and where recognition has been granted – in constitutions, disability laws, educational legislation and language laws – this is rarely supported by a language policy designed to promote and protect sign languages. The time is ripe for the Council of Europe to carry out a new survey of policy and practice regarding sign languages in its member states and to include sign languages in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

### ***Sign languages as part of multilingual Europe***

*Eeva Tupi, Human Rights Adviser at the Finnish League for Human Rights*

The situation of sign languages and Deaf communities varies greatly across Council of Europe member states. It is not the case, for example, that all Deaf children have the opportunity to learn sign language as early as possible; but unless this happens, communication in the family, educational prospects and social inclusion are put in danger. In some countries sign language is considered only as a last resort, which is contrary to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Often sign language issues are dealt with by a single government ministry instead of by all ministries working transversally. The ECML's inclusion of sign languages in its work provides an example for other agencies to follow. Much has changed since

the adoption of the European Convention on Regional or Minority Languages in the 1990s, when there was much less awareness of sign languages than there is today. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe should consider adding a protocol on sign languages to the ECRML.

(Further reading: Eva Tuupi, *Sign language rights in the framework of the Council of Europe and its member States*; <https://rm.coe.int/168093e08f>.)

### ***The development in the status of sign languages under the resolutions of the European Parliament, with special regard to the past 10 years***

*Ádám Kósa, Member of the European Parliament, EPP Group*

Sign languages have the same structural features as spoken languages and the same capacity to evolve; they should thus have equality of status in law. Recognition of linguistic rights allows the individual to identify with and freely use one or more mother tongues; and it allows minority groups to use their own language and promote it in education, training and the workplace. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has brought fundamental changes in attitudes to sign languages, which become part of the national legal system when a country ratifies the Convention. Further support for change has come from Recommendations 1492, 1598 and 2247 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Ádám Kósa (Hungary) was the first Deaf person to be elected to the European Parliament and chairs the Disability Intergroup; he was joined in 2014 by Helga Stevens (Belgium), the first Deaf female MEP. Together they have worked to promote a human rights rather than a medical view of Deafness. In 1988 the European Parliament called on the European Commission to bring forward a proposal regarding official recognition of sign languages and their use, and this was repeated in 1998. In 2010 the European Parliament adopted the European Union of the Deaf Brussels Declaration concerning the recognition, protection and promotion of sign languages. Sign languages are included in the European Disability Strategy (2010–2020), and in 2016 the European Parliament passed a resolution on sign languages and the provision of professional sign language interpreters.

Sign languages are included in the constitutions of Austria, Finland, Hungary and Portugal. There are sign language laws in Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Sign languages are mentioned in other laws in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Sign languages have been accorded formal recognition by parliaments or governments in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

### ***Sign languages from the perspective of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)***

*Sixto Molina, Head of Secretariat, ECRML, Council of Europe*

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages came into force 21 years ago and reflects the situation at that time. It is concerned with the protection and promotion of the languages of traditional minorities: languages that have been used in the territory in question for at least 100 years. The ECRML thus does not include migrant languages. A further limitation is that the languages to be protected are determined not by the Council of Europe but by member states; other languages enjoy a lower level of protection. Also, member states are given the option of ratifying a limited number of articles. To date, no member state has

proposed that sign languages should be covered by the ECRML. The Charter's experts have discussed this issue; only a third of them are in favour of including sign languages. But we need to look to the future and consider how the rights of sign language users can be protected. The various recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe show that the importance of sign languages is recognized by politicians. It may be easier to develop a specific instrument for sign languages instead of including them in the ECRML. Like the ECRML, such an instrument would need to be accompanied by a monitoring process. A first step might be to look at one advanced country, take each of the provisions of the Charter, and see whether it is relevant to sign languages.

### ***Sign languages as minority languages: the route to acceptance***

*Joseph Murray, President of the World Federation of the Deaf*

The World Federation of the Deaf has 125 national members who between them represent the interests of 70 million Deaf people using more than 200 distinct and unique sign languages. Previous speakers have discussed the status of sign languages in Europe and pointed out some of the things that remain to be done. At national level, almost all European Union countries have some sort of legislative or constitutional recognition of their national sign language; most other countries around the world do not. Formal recognition is an essential first step, but too often it is the only step taken. Recognition needs to be backed up with rights to use sign language in everyday life; and the right to use sign language should not be limited to communication through interpreters. The theme of the 2019 WFD Congress was "Sign Language Rights for All", and "all" included hearing people who want to learn and use their national sign language. Governments should promote inclusive bilingual sign language schools that are open to all, but especially to deaf children, for whom sign language is a precondition for educational success. For the same reason, hearing parents of Deaf children need support in learning sign language so that they can communicate with their children. We must also work for the acceptance of sign languages by society at large and dare to imagine a time when it is possible to go anywhere in our society and have a conversation in our national sign language.

### **Questions/comments from the floor**

- Finland, often mentioned by the panellists, has taken sign language into its national action plan. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for legislative issues, but all government departments play their part.
- Slovenia is adding sign language to its constitution, a process that takes two years. This provides an opportunity to inform and involve politicians and ministries.
- It is essential to provide parents of Deaf children with early support. Sixto Molina argued that integrated schools are the key to progress. Markku Jokinen explained that in Finland the parents of Deaf children are introduced to a team of Deaf professionals at the earliest possible moment. Eeva Tupi said that when she was a child someone came to her house to teach her sign language. Agreeing that Deaf children need the earliest possible access to sign language, Joseph Murray argued that the same applies to children with cochlear implants because there is evidence that they manage better with spoken language if they also have sign. In Joseph Murray's view the decisive factor is not what the legal provisions are but how they are implemented.
- Ádám Kósa insisted that Deaf people must always be involved in issues that implicate sign languages. In Hungary medical intervention tends to be the first route taken: we

need to educate medical professionals. When he was a child people were surprised to see him signing; that is no longer the case, which is a sign of progress.

- Several speakers emphasized the importance of ensuring that information is disseminated as widely as possible in order to involve the grassroots.

## **The Council of Europe's engagement in the field of sign languages**

*Chair: Sarah Breslin, Executive Director of the ECML, Council of Europe*

Introducing this session, Sarah Breslin noted that the *CEFR CV* brings together two sets of descriptors developed specifically for sign languages and prepares for the inclusion of sign languages in plurilingual education.

### **CEFR Companion Volume: A modality-inclusive reference framework for languages**

#### ***What is new? What is the rationale?***

*Brian North, Eurocentres Foundation*

The main aims of the *CEFR* are to promote transparency and coherence by providing common reference points and to stimulate reflection on current practice. The *CEFR CV* provides a discussion of key aspects of the *CEFR* for teaching and learning, together with an updated and expanded set of scales, which includes new scales for mediation and plurilingual/pluricultural competences. All scales are modality-inclusive and new scales for signing competences have also been added. The explanatory text summarizes the aims of the *CEFR*, explains how its action-oriented approach should be implemented and how the illustrative descriptors should be used. The new scales for mediation are concerned with mediation across languages, within one language and across modalities. Everything in the *CEFR* is relevant for sign languages, including all descriptors. Modality-inclusiveness has required the reformulation of many descriptors. For example, LISTENING AS A MEMBER OF A LIVE AUDIENCE has become UNDERSTANDING AS A MEMBER OF A LIVE AUDIENCE, and LISTENING TO THE RADIO AND AUDIO RECORDINGS has become UNDERSTANDING AUDIO (OR SIGNED) MEDIA AND RECORDINGS. There are seven scales for signing competences, divided into three categories: *Linguistic* – SIGN LANGUAGE REPERTOIRE, DIAGRAMMATICAL ACCURACY; *Sociolinguistic* – SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROPRIATENESS AND CULTURAL REPERTOIRE; *Pragmatic* – SIGN TEXT STRUCTURE, SETTING AND PERSPECTIVES, PROCESSING SPEED (RECEPTIVE), SIGNING FLUENCY (PRODUCTIVE).

#### ***The notion of modality-inclusive descriptors in the CEFR***

*Christian Rathmann, Humboldt University, Berlin*

The ECML's ProSign project (2012–2015) adapted the *CEFR*'s descriptors to meet the needs of sign languages, publishing them in International Sign and English. To date this work has been translated into seven European languages and has contributed to the recognition of sign languages, to standardization and professionalization, and to the development of curricula and assessment. Meanwhile the *CEFR CV* was developed. Whereas the *CEFR* refers to spoken languages and the ProSign descriptors to sign languages, the final version of the *CEFR CV* is modality-inclusive and refers equally to signed and spoken languages. The *CEFR CV* will be published in 2020 in English and International Sign and will be available for translation into other spoken and signed languages.

### ***Modality-specific descriptors for sign language competences***

*Jörg Keller, Zurich University of Applied Sciences*

Major differences between spoken and signed languages concern modality (visual/manual vs. speaking/listening/reading/writing) and medium (video vs. script as a means of recording text); minor differences concern linguistic features of sign languages that are not prominent in spoken languages. Thus, besides describing communicative language activities in modality-inclusive language, the *CEFR CV* also needed to include descriptors for competences that are specific to sign languages. These descriptors were developed by a Swiss National Science Foundation project carried out at Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The project adopted a mixed-methods approach that was community-based, included workshops with Deaf sign language instructors, and was guided by theory and hypotheses. The project was realized in a three-phase plan: (i) identification of text types and descriptors; (ii) refinement and identification of descriptors; (iii) calibration, analysis and categorization of descriptors. A final phase combined evaluation with interpretation of the practical usefulness of the descriptors. Altogether, 561 of about 720 descriptors survived the refinement process. It should be noted that the written versions of descriptors are based on video originals. Here are three level B1+ descriptors from the scale for SETTING AND PERSPECTIVE:

- *Can construct a setting in the signing space for a text (landscape, family, situation) in a linguistically correct manner*
- *Can describe correctly the relative positions of entities with respect to each other*
- *Can demonstrate a change of character perspective through an alteration in upper body posture*

Sign language research contributes to a better understanding of: human cognition, the nature of human languages, language acquisition, the nature of linguistic representations, language processing, and the role of gesture and body language in communication. For this reason, sign languages are as important to the *CEFR CV* as the *CEFR CV* is to sign languages.

### **ProSign 2 (2016–2019): Promoting excellence in sign language instruction**

#### ***Sign language teacher competences***

*Tobias Haug, Interkantonale Hochschule für Heilpädagogik Zürich*

*Beppie van den Bogaerde, University of Amsterdam*

The goal of this project was to compile an overview of the competences needed by sign language teachers. The project produced a guide that contains adapted content from the ECML project “Towards a CEFR for language teachers”, the results of group work carried out at a ProSign/European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters conference held in Belgrade in 2018, and competences identified by a Finnish research project (De Weerd et al. 2016). The guide is designed to serve as a starting point for (i) the development of curricula in sign language teacher education and (ii) discussion and development at local, national and European levels. The guide is aimed at professionals engaged in sign language teacher education and all stakeholders, including national and European associations of sign language teachers.

#### ***European Language Portfolio (ELP) for sign language learners***

*Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin*

*Christian Rathmann, Humboldt University, Berlin*

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed by the Language Policy Unit of the

Council of Europe to support learner autonomy, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness/competence and to allow users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages. It has three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier (<https://www.coe.int/portfolio>).

The ELP for sign language learners is an electronic model that takes account of the visual modality of sign languages. It has been piloted with university students in Germany, Poland and Ireland and evaluated in four phases:

1. Users identified three strengths: the focus on goal setting, the possibility of documenting one's own learning, and the link to the CEFR's descriptors and levels. They also identified two weaknesses: the design of the eELP and the use of checklists. Performance anxiety was one of the major concerns of first-year students – not knowing how to bridge the gap between what they *can do* and what they *need to do*.
2. Users identified three strengths: the possibility of sharing data via Moodle, the establishment of a learning routine, and a comprehensible means of setting one's own learning targets. They also identified three weaknesses: the amount of effort required to use the eELP, uncertainty about the accuracy of self-assessment, and the use of the dossier. Students found that the eELP strengthened their motivation, supported goal setting and encouraged reflective learning.
3. Users valued the "can do" approach to the description of language proficiency, which helps them to identify what they can do and plot the path that they need to follow.
4. As students move from A2 to B1 they pass through a succession of recursive phases: struggling → negotiating → navigating → engaging.

The eELP for sign language learners has great potential to support reflective and autonomous learning; it allows users to keep everything in one place; and users can choose which modality/medium to use – signed, written or spoken. The eELP is available to sign language learners via the ECML website.

### Questions/comments from the floor

- Asked how people can get information about the ECML's sign language projects, Christoph Rathmann explained that the ECML sends information to member states for dissemination through their official networks. Information is also provided by the websites of the ECML and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. A European network of sign language teachers has been closely linked to the ProSign projects.
- A participant from Moscow State Linguistic University said that her institution will try to make the sign language eELP available in Russian.
- It was pointed out that sign language teachers often lack formal knowledge of their language.

### Debate I: Learning, teaching and assessment of sign languages

*Moderator: Thomas Geissler, Humboldt University, Berlin*

Introducing the first debate, Thomas Geissler said that sign languages are now recognized and a modality-inclusive version of the *CEFR* has been developed along with other instruments. Further collaboration with the Council of Europe is clearly necessary. Our aim should be to create a situation where mediation between sign and spoken languages is a natural part of social communication, as Joseph Murray argued.

***How can we exploit the CEFR Companion Volume for curriculum development and assessment in secondary and higher education?***

- One participant wondered whether primary education should be the first target rather than higher education. Lorraine Leeson replied that in order to provide sign language education for Deaf children, it is necessary to train professionals with the necessary skills. That can only be done in higher education.
- Another participant said that some sign language teachers do not themselves have high levels of proficiency.

***How can plurilingual education help?***

- The CEFR refers to second language proficiency, so how relevant is it to the acquisition of sign language as a first language/mother tongue?
- Jörg Keller argued that the *CEFR CV* addresses the plurilingual challenge by guiding graded education.

***What kind of institutional support is needed?***

- More research is needed on progression in early sign language acquisition.
- Networks play an essential role in securing further progress.
- Markku Jokinen pointed out that there are many different modes of Deaf education, including oralism. Plurilingualism is above all this, an umbrella. The problem is that politicians are often completely ignorant of language, language acquisition and related matters.
- Sarah Breslin explained that Council of Europe initiatives require the support of member states and that in the case of the ECML, it is the member states who propose programme activities. This means that the proposed Recommendation to the Committee of Ministers on plurilingual education will be adopted only if it has the support of member states.

**Debate II: I have a dream! Sign languages are recognised in Europe**

*Moderator: Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin*

***How can we contribute to the promotion and recognition of sign languages?***

- The European institutions have not changed. Deaf people have gained entry because they are exceptional individuals; they have opened the door for others. Sign languages need to be included in all language rights instruments, including the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.
- The Council of Europe can support the dynamics of change, but action must come from the member states.
- The concept of plurilingual education marks a paradigm shift, challenging traditional distinctions between first, second and foreign languages.
- 260 million children are not attending school, and they are becoming more and more difficult to reach.
- There is a clear connection between individual and institutional lobbying. Change will not happen of its own accord; step-by-step progress must be made in individual countries.

- The inclusion of interpreting services for Erasmus+ students is a significant innovation, but we have to look to other sources of funding to support quality research.
- Joseph Murray noted that “complexity” has been used repeatedly throughout the session. There are Deaf people in every minority group across the world, which means that barriers are complex. Spoken language users also face complexity. Society will never comprise only signing or only speaking individuals. We have to make use of good practice wherever we find it.

#### ***How can the Council of Europe help?***

- The ECML’s sign language projects have had a significant impact in Poland, where an online sign language course has been developed.
- The ProSign projects have facilitated the establishment of professional networks, but governments are unaware of this. Deaf people outside the European Union need help from those inside.

#### **Concluding remarks by the rapporteur**

*David Little*

The publication of the modality-inclusive *CEFR CV* marks an important milestone in the history of sign languages and sign language education, but it is only a beginning. Further progress will require intensive engagement with the *CEFR CV* – its descriptors and scales, but also its underlying ethos – on the part of sign language/Deaf Studies professionals. Meanwhile, there are two things we need from the Council of Europe. The first is a description of its plurilingual concept that includes sign languages: a clear and accessible explanation of what the concept means in psycholinguistic terms; how it is related to language use in society; and how we achieve the goals of the plurilingual approach in an infinite variety of educational contexts. The second thing we need is for the Council of Europe to address as a matter of urgency the question of including sign languages in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.