37. Language planning

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Abstract

In this chapter, three aspects of language planning will be described for sign languages: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. As for status planning, in most countries the focus of attention is usually on the legal recognition of the national sign language. Corpus planning shall be discussed in relation to standardisation and lexical modernisation, followed by a short discussion of acquisition planning. Standardisation of languages in general is a controversial issue. There are only few examples of efforts to standardise a sign language. The process of standardisation of the lexicon of Sign Language of the Netherlands will be discussed as an example of a specific form of standardisation, informed by thorough knowledge of the lexical variation existing in the language.

1. Introduction

In this chapter, selected aspects of sign language politics will be discussed. In describing issues related to the use and status of a language, various terms have been used in the literature: language politics, language policy, and language planning. These terms require some clarification. The term “language planning”, introduced by the American-Norwegian linguist Einar Haugen in his 1968 article about modern Norwegian, describes “an activity of preparing a normative orthography, grammar, and dictionary for
the guidance of writers and speakers in a non-homogeneous speech community” (Haugen 1968, 673).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the scientific interest in language planning mainly applied to a third world context where the establishment of one standardized national language was regarded necessary — from a Western European perspective. Language planning tended to be considered as an activity which has as its main goal to solve problems and to establish changes. Two decades after Haugen introduced his definition of “language planning”, the sociolinguist Robert L. Cooper proposed an alternative definition which was somewhat less oriented towards problem solving: “language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their codes” (Cooper 1989, 45). In the meantime, others had also contributed to the definition of language planning by questioning the advisability of language planning: “It can be done, but should it been done?” (Fishman 1983).

The relationship between language politics, language policy, and language planning may be described in the following way: from certain language politics, a certain language policy will follow, which will be implemented through some type of language planning. In other words: language politics refers to the why, language policy to the what, and language planning to the how.

A policy is a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). The term may apply to government, private sector organizations and groups, and individuals. Policy differs from rules or law. While law can compel or prohibit behaviours, policy merely guides actions toward those that are most likely to yield a desired outcome. However, policy may also refer to the process of making important organizational decisions, including the identification of different alternatives and choosing among them on the basis of the impact they will have. Policies can also be understood as political, management, financial, and administrative mechanisms arranged to reach explicit goals. Since policy refers to both a plan of action and the process of making a decision, the term may be a little confusing. Therefore, in this chapter, the term ‘language planning’ will be used, referring to those political and other opinions and measures that focus on the regulation or improvement of the use and/or status of a language.

In this chapter, the relevant aspects of language planning, as mentioned above, will be discussed with respect to sign languages. It is important to stress the fact that for most languages, but certainly for most sign languages, language planning is not formally and rationally conducted by some central authority. As Cooper (1989, 41) states: “In reality, language planning rarely conforms to this ideal and more often than not language planning is a messy affair, ad hoc, haphazard, and emotionally driven”. Moreover, although language planning activities may be conducted by a wide range of institutions — apart from language academies, governments, and ministries of education — pressure groups and individuals play a crucial role in the process of sign language planning activities in various countries.

In section 2, we will address some general aspects of language planning. The discussion of status planning in section 3 comprises perspectives on deafness (section 3.1) and legal recognition of sign languages (section 3.2). Sections 4 to 6 focus on different aspects of corpus planning, namely standardisation (section 4.1), codification of the language (section 4.2), a case study of standardisation (section 5), and lexical modernisation (section 6). Acquisition planning will be discussed in section 7.
2. Language planning

Language planning can be divided into three subtypes: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition or educational planning. Status planning refers to all efforts undertaken to change the use and function of a language (or language variety). Deumert (2001) states that examples of status planning are matters such as:

- recognition (or not) of a language as an official language;
- multilingualism in situations where more than one language is the national language (for example, Flemish and French in Belgium).

Corpus planning is concerned with the internal structure of a language such as the prescriptive intervention in the forms of a language. According to Deumert (2001), corpus planning is often related to matters such as:

- reform or introduction of a written system (spelling system; e.g., the switch from the Arabic to the Latin writing system in Turkey during the reign of Atatürk);
- standardisation (a codified form) of a certain language or language variety involving the preparation of a normative orthography, grammar, and dictionary;
- lexical modernisation of a language (for example, Hebrew and Hausa).

Acquisition planning concerns the teaching and learning of languages. Acquisition planning in spoken languages is often supported and promoted by national institutions such as the Dante Institute (Italian), the Goethe Institute (German), Maison Descartes (French), etc. Comparable organisations that are concerned with teaching and learning of sign languages are often run by international organisations of the Deaf (e.g. the World Federation of the Deaf), by national organisations of the Deaf, by universities (e.g. Stockholm University; the Deafness, Cognition and Language (DCAL) Research Centre at University College in London; Gallaudet University in Washington, DC), or by national sign language centres, such as the Centre for Sign Language and Sign Supported Communication (KC) in Denmark, the Institute for German Sign Language in Hamburg, the CNR in Rome, and the Dutch Sign Centre in the Netherlands. Moreover, many individual researchers all over the world have contributed in significant ways to the development and spread of their national sign languages. Status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning have all played an important role with respect to sign languages around the globe and will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

3. Status planning: Recognition of sign languages

Since the early days of sign language research in the middle of the 20th century, status planning and, more specifically, the recognition of a language as a fully-fledged language has been a major issue. The status of a sign language depends on the status of deaf people, the historical background, and the role a language plays within deaf education. The history of sign language research is thus closely related to the history of
deaf education and the perspectives on deaf people. Therefore, before turning to the recognition of sign languages in section 3.2, two different views on deafness and deaf people will first be introduced in the next section.

3.1. Perspectives on deafness: Deficit or linguistic minority

For centuries, deafness has been viewed as a deficit. This, often medical, perspective focuses on the fact that deaf people cannot hear (well). From this perspective, deaf people have a problem that needs to be fixed as quickly as possible in order for them to integrate properly and fully in the hearing society. From the perspective of the hearing majority, deaf people are different and need to assimilate and adapt. Great emphasis is therefore put on technological aids, ranging from hearing aids to cochlear implants (CI). With each new technology that becomes available, the hope to finally cure deafness increases. Within this mostly hearing perspective there is no room for Deaf identity or Deaf culture: deaf people are just hearing people who cannot hear (Lane 2002).

This perspective on deafness has had and still has a tremendous impact on the lives of deaf people throughout the world (for an overview, see Monaghan et al. (2003) and Ladd (2003)). The status of sign languages in Western societies varies throughout history. In some periods, sign languages were used in some way or the other in deaf education (for instance, in 18th century Paris); at other times, sign languages were banned from deaf education altogether (from 1880–1980 in most Western societies; see chapter 38, History of Sign Languages and Sign Language Linguistics, for details on the history of deaf education).

The first study that applied the principles of spoken language linguistics to a sign language (American Sign Language, ASL) was William Stokoe’s monograph *Sign Language Structure* (Stokoe 1960). This study as well as subsequent, by now ‘classic’, studies on ASL by American linguists such as Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi (Klima/Bellugi 1979) and Charlotte Baker and Dennis Cokely (Baker/Cokely 1980) gave the impetus to another perspective on deafness and deaf people: if sign languages are natural languages, then their users belong to a linguistic minority. Consequently, deaf people are not hearing people with a deficit; they are people who are different from hearing people. They may not have access to a spoken language, but they do have access to a visual language which can be acquired in a natural way, comparable to the acquisition of a spoken language (see chapter 28, Acquisition). Under this view, then, deaf people form a Deaf community with its own language, identity, and culture. Still, the Deaf minorities that make up Deaf communities are not a homogenous group. Paddy Ladd writes:

> It is also important to note that within Western societies where there is significant migration, or within linguistic minorities inside a single nation-state, there are Deaf people who are in effect, minorities within minorities. Given the oralist hegemony, most of these Deaf people have been cut off not only from mainstream culture, but also from their own ‘native’ cultures, a form of double oppression immensely damaging to them even without factoring oppression from Deaf communities themselves. (Ladd 2003, 59)
Furthermore, there is an important difference between Deaf communities and other language minorities. Sign languages are passed on from one generation to the next only to a very limited extent. The main reason for this is that more than 95% of deaf people have hearing parents for whom a sign language is not a native language. Therefore, most deaf people have learned their sign language from deaf peers, from deaf adults outside of the family, or from parents who have acquired a sign language as a second language.

It has been pointed out that — contrary to what many believe — linguistic analyses and scientific descriptions of sign language did exist in the United States as early as the 19th century, and that deaf educators did have access to literature related to the role, use, and structure of sign language (Nover 2000). However, these studies never had an impact comparable to that of the early linguistic studies on the structure of ASL mentioned above, which gave a major impulse to linguistic research. In many countries, this legitimization of signing also led to major changes in deaf education policies and to the emancipation of deaf people. It seems that the timing of Stokoe’s analysis was perfect: oral methods in Western deaf education had failed dramatically, deaf people did not integrate into the hearing society, and the reading skills of deaf school leavers did not reach beyond those of nine year old hearing children (Conrad 1979). Furthermore, around the same time, language acquisition studies stressed the importance of early mother-child interaction for adequate language development. In several parts of the world, the awareness of the importance of their natural language for deaf people increased.

The first European conference on sign language research, held in Sweden in 1979 (Ahlgren/Bergman 1980), inspired other researchers to initiate research establishing the existence of distinct sign languages in many different European countries. In 1981, Sweden was the first country in the world to recognize its national sign language, Swedish Sign Language (SSL), as a language by making it mandatory in deaf education. The legislation followed a 1977 home language reform measure allowing minority and immigrant children to receive instruction in their native language (Monaghan 2003, 15).

3.2. Legal recognition of sign languages

For a very long time, sign languages have been ignored and as a consequence, their potential has been underestimated. In areas where deaf people are not allowed to use their own natural language in all functions of society, their sign language clearly has a minority status which is closely related to the status of its users. However, being a minority does not always automatically generate a minority status for the respective sign language. There are examples of communities in which the hearing majority used or still uses the sign language of the deaf minority as a lingua franca: for instance, Martha’s Vineyard (Groce 1985), the village of Desa Kolok in Bali (Branson/Miller/Marsaja 1996), and the village of Adamorobe in Ghana (Nyst 2007) (see chapter 24, Shared Sign Languages, for discussion).

The status of sign languages depends very much on the legal recognition of these languages — especially from the point of view of Deaf communities and Deaf organizations — and has been one of the most important issues in various countries since 1981. Most of the activities centred around the topic of sign language recognition and bilin-
gual education, which is quite understandable given the history of deaf education and the fact that deaf people have been in a dependent and mostly powerless position for centuries. Legal recognition may give the power of control, that is, the right of language choice, back to those who should choose, who should be in control: the deaf people themselves. A word of caution though is necessary here and is adequately formulated by Verena Krausneker:

Recognition of a Sign Language will not solve all problems of its users at once and maybe not even in the near future. But legal recognition of Sign Languages will secure the social and legal space for its users to stop the tiresome work of constant self-defence and start creative self-defined processes and developments. Legal recognition of a language will give a minority space to think and desire a plan and achieve the many other things its members think they need or want. Basic security in the form of language rights will influence educational and other most relevant practices deeply. (Krausneker 2003, 11)

The legal status of sign languages differs from country to country. There is no standard way in which such recognition can be formally or legally extended: every country has its own interpretation. In some countries, the national sign language is an official state language, whereas in others, it has a protected status in certain areas, such as education. Australian Sign Language (Auslan), for example, was recognised by the Australian Government as a “community language other than English” and as the preferred language of the Deaf community in policy statements in 1987 and 1991. This recognition, however, does not ensure any structural provision of services in Auslan.

Another example of legal recognition is Spain. Full legal recognition of sign languages in Spain has only been granted in 2007, when a Spanish State law concerning sign languages was passed. However, several autonomous regional governments had already passed bills during the 1990s that indirectly recognized the status of sign language and aimed at promoting accessibility in Spanish Sign Language (LSE) in different areas, featuring education as one of the central ones. It should be pointed out that legal recognition is not equivalent to official status because the Spanish Constitution from 1978 only grants official status to four spoken languages (Spanish, Catalan, Galician, and Basque). The new Catalan Autonomy Law from 2006 includes the right to use Catalan Sign Language (LSC) and promotes its teaching and protection. The Catalan Parliament had already passed a non-binding bill in 1994 promoting the use of LSC in the Catalan education system and research into the language (Josep Quer, personal communication).

The situation with respect to legal recognition can be summarised as follows (Wheatley/Pabsch 2010; Krausneker 2008):

- In the following 32 countries, the national sign languages have legal status through other laws: Australia, Belgium (FI), Brazil, Byelorussia, Canada, China, Columbia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iran, Latvia, Lithuania, Mozambique, Norway, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russia, the Slovak Republic, Spain,
Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Ukraine, the United States, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.

In Cuba, Mauritius, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the national sign languages have been recognised politically, which has resulted in the funding of large national projects (e.g. DCAL in London) and institutions. In the Netherlands, for instance, the Dutch Sign Centre is partially funded for lexicographic activities and the Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) Interpreter/Teacher training programme was established at the University of Utrecht. Note, however, that this type of legal recognition is not sufficient under Dutch Law to infer a legal status of NGT itself as a language.

The European Parliament unanimously approved a resolution about sign languages on June 17, 1988. The resolution asks all member countries for recognition of their national sign languages as official languages of the Deaf. So far, this resolution has had limited effect. In 2003, sign languages were recognised as minority languages in the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages. Another way to pursue legal recognition might be via a new Human Rights charter for which linguistic human rights are a prerequisite and that will be ratified by all member states. In 1996, a number of institutions and non-governmental organizations, present at the UNESCO meeting in Barcelona, presented the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, which takes language communities and not states as its point of departure (UNESCO 1996). One of the relevant articles in the light of recognition of sign languages is article 3.

Sign language users and their languages have been in danger at various times throughout history. However, a growing number of people have been referring to sign languages as endangered languages – in fact, likely to become extinct in the near future – since Graham Turner expressed his concerns in 2004:

We have seen a dramatic growth in several major types of threat to heritage sign languages: demographic shifts which alone will reduce signing populations sharply, the rapid uptake of cochlear implants [...], the development and imminent roll-out of biotechnologies such as genetic intervention and hair-cell regeneration; and the on-going rise of under-skilled L2 users of sign language in professional positions, coinciding with a decline in concern over the politics of language among younger Deaf people. (Turner 2004, 180)

Legal recognition will not be sufficient to ensure the status of sign languages. A community that wants to preserve its language has a number of options. A spoken language example is that of Modern Hebrew, which was revived as a mother tongue after centuries of being learned and studied only in its ancient written form. Similarly, Irish has had considerable institutional and political support as the national language of Ireland, despite major inroads by English. In New Zealand, Maori communities established nursery schools staffed by elders and conducted entirely in Maori, called kohanga reo, "language nests" (Woodbury 2009).

It is the duty of linguists to learn as much as possible about languages, so that even if a language disappears, knowledge of that language won’t disappear at the same time. To that end, researchers document sign language use in both formal and informal settings on video, along with translations and notations. In recent years, a growing number of projects has been established to compile digital sign language corpora; for
instance, for NGT (Crasborn/Zwitserlood/Ros 2008), British Sign Language (Schembri et al. 2009), and SSL (Bergman et al. 2011). These corpora will not only support the linguistic research that is needed to describe the individual languages, they will also provide access for learners of sign languages, and they will ensure preservation of the language as it is used at a given point in time (for digital sign language corpora, see also chapter 44, Computer Modelling). However, a language will only be truly alive and out of danger as long as there is a community of language users and the language is transmitted from generation to generation. Sign languages are extremely vulnerable in this respect.

4. Corpus planning

One of the goals of corpus planning is the prescriptive intervention in the forms of a language. Corpus planning is concerned with the internal structure of a language, that is, with matters such as writing systems, standardisation, and lexical modernisation. There is no standardised writing system for sign languages comparable to the writing systems that exist for spoken languages. Rather, there are many different ways to notate signs and sign sentences based on Stokoe’s notation system (e.g. the Hamburg Notation System) or on dance writing systems (e.g. Sutton’s Sign Writing System; see chapter 43, Transcription, for details). The lack of a written system has contributed greatly to language variation within sign languages. In relation to most sign languages, standardisation has not been a goal in itself. Linguistic interest in sign languages has led to documentation of the lexicon and grammar of a growing number of sign languages. In this section, we will discuss standardisation and codification. In section 5, we will present a case study of an explicit form of standardisation as a prerequisite for legal recognition of a sign language, NGT in the Netherlands.

4.1. Standardisation

A standard language is most commonly defined as a codified form of a language, which is understood as the uniform linguistic norm (Deumert 2001; Reagan 2001). The term ‘codified’ refers to explicit norms of a language specified in documents such as dictionaries and grammars. The concept of a standard language is often wrongly associated with the ‘pure’, ‘original’ form of a language — assuming there would be something like a ‘pure’ form of a language. Often, the most prestigious form of a language becomes standardised. The language variety of those who have power and status in society is often seen as the most prestigious one. Acceptance of this variety as the norm is vital for a successful standardisation. With respect to spoken languages, the standard form is most often the dialect that is associated with specific subgroups and with specific functions. In this context, it is interesting to see which essential features of modern Standard English David Crystal (1995, 110) has listed:

- It is historically based on one dialect among many, but now has special status, without a local base. It is largely (but not completely) neutral with respect to regional identity.
- Standard English is not a matter of pronunciation, rather of grammar, vocabulary, and orthography.
- It carries most 'prestige' within English speaking countries.
- It is a desirable educational target.
- Although widely understood, it is not widely spoken.

Status planning and corpus planning are very closely related. If the status of a language needs to be raised, a form of corpus planning is required. For example, the lexicon needs to be expanded in order to meet the needs of different functions of the language. Different degrees of standardisation can be distinguished (based on Deumert 2001):

1. Un-standardised spoken or sign language for which no written system has been developed.
2. Partly standardised or un-standardised written language used mainly in primary education. The language is characterised by high degrees of linguistic variation.
3. Young standard language: used in education and administration, but not felt to be fit for use in science, technology, and at a tertiary or research level.
4. Archaic standard language: languages which were used widely in pre-industrial times but are not spoken any longer, such as classic Latin and Greek.
5. Mature modern standard language: employed at all areas of communication; for example English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, etc.

Most sign languages can be placed in stages 1–3. We have to distinguish active forms of standardising the language (see section 5 for further discussion) and more natural processes of language standardisation. Any form of codification of the language, however, will lead — even unintentionally — to some form of standardisation. This is the case for many sign languages, as will be discussed in the next paragraph.

4.2. Codification of the language

The history of most sign languages is one of oppression by hearing educationalists. Until the mid 1960s, most sign languages were not viewed as fully-fledged languages on a par with spoken languages. Once sign language research starts in a country, usually the first major task one sets out to do is the compilation of a dictionary.

Clearly, dictionaries are much more than just a text that describes the meaning of words or signs. The word 'dictionary' suggests authority, status, and scholarship: the size of the dictionary, the paper that is used, and its cover all attribute to the status of the language that has been described. The first dictionaries of sign languages did not only serve the purpose of describing the lexicon of the language; rather, for most Deaf communities, a sign language dictionary is a historic publication of paramount social importance which can be used as a powerful instrument in the advancement of high-quality bilingual education as well as in the full exercise of the constitutional rights of deaf people (e.g. the first BSL/English dictionary (Brien 1992) and the first print publication of the standard signs of NGT, the Van Dale Basiswoordenboek NGT (Schermert/Koolhof 2009)). Introductions to sign dictionaries often explicitly mention the fact that the purpose of the dictionary is to confirm and raise the status of the sign language.
Sign language dictionaries deal with variation in the language in different ways. Even though the primary intention of the majority of sign lexicographers is to document and describe the lexicon of a sign language, their choices in this process determine which sign varieties are included and which are not. Therefore, inevitably, many sign language lexicographers produce a standardising dictionary of the sign language or at least (mostly unintentionally) nominate one variant to be the preferred one. And even if this is not the intention of the lexicographer, the general public – especially hearing sign language learners – often interprets the information in the dictionary as reflecting the prescribed, rather than described language. The fact that sign languages lack a written form confronts lexicographers with a serious problem: which variant of a sign is the correct one and should thus be included as the citation form in the dictionary. Therefore, lexicographers have to determine, in one way or the other, whether an item in the language is used by the majority of a given population, or whether it is used by a particular subset of the population. To date only a few sign language dictionaries have been based on extensive research on language variation (e.g. for Auslan (Johnston 1989), NGT (Schermer/Harder/Bos 1988; Schermer et al. 2006; Schermer/Koolhof 2009), and Danish Sign Language (Centre for Sign Language and Sign Supported Speech KC 2008)). Also, there are online dictionaries available which document the regional varieties of the particular sign language (e.g. the Flemish Sign Language dictionary (www.gebaren.ugent.be) and the work done on Swiss German Sign Language by Boyes Braem (2001)).

In cases where sign language dictionaries have indeed been made with the explicit purpose of standardising the sign language in mind, but have not been based on extensive research on lexical variation, these attempts to lasting standardisation have usually failed because the deaf community did not accept the dictionary as a reflection of their sign language lexicon; this happened, for instance, in Flanders and Sweden in the 1970s. Another example of controversy concerns Japanese Sign Language (NS). Nakamura (2011) describes the debate about the way in which the dominant organization of deaf people in Japan (JFD) has tried since 1980 to maintain active control of the lexicon in a way that is no longer accepted by a growing part of the deaf community. The controversy is mostly about the way in which new lexicon is coined, which – according to members of D-Pro (a group of young Deaf people that has been active since 1993) – does not reflect the pure NS, which should exclude mouthings or vocalisations of words.

Another form of codification is the description of the grammar of the language. Since sign language linguistics is a fairly young research field, to date very few comprehensive sign language grammars are available (see, for example, Baker/Cokely (1980) for ASL; Schermer et al. (1991) for NGT; Sutton-Spence/Woll (1999) for BSL; Johnston/Schembri (2007) for Auslan; Gébert/Adone (2006) for Mauritius Sign Language; Papasyrrou et al. (2008) for German Sign Language; and Meir/Sandler (2008) for Israeli Sign Language). As with dictionaries, most grammars are intended to be descriptive, but are viewed by language learners as prescriptive.
5. A case study: Standardisation of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT)

In this section, the process of standardisation will be illustrated by means of a case study: the standardisation of NGT. Schermer (2003) has described this process in full detail. The information from this article will be briefly summarised below.

As a result of a decade of lobbying for the recognition of NGT by the Dutch Deaf Council, a covenant was signed in 1998 between all schools for the Deaf, the Organisation for Parents of Deaf Children (FODOK), the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health and Welfare to carry out three projects the goal of which was to implement bilingual (NGT/Dutch) education for Deaf children. One of these projects was the Standardisation of the Basic Lexicon of NGT to be used in schools for the Deaf (referred to as the “STABOL” project).

The projects were carried out between 1999–2002 by the Dutch Sign Centre, the University of Amsterdam, and the schools for the Deaf. The STABOL project was required by the Dutch government as a prerequisite for the legal recognition of NGT despite objections by the Dutch Deaf community and NGT researchers. In the period between 1980 (when research on NGT started) and 1999, a major project had been carried out which documented extensively the lexicon of NGT. The results of this so-called KOMVA project, which had yielded information about the extent of regional variation in NGT (cf. Schermer 1990, 2003), formed the basis for the standardisation project.

The standardisation of the NGT basic lexicon was a highly controversial issue. As far as the Dutch government was concerned, it was not negotiable: without a standard lexicon, there could be no legal recognition of NGT. There was also an economic argument for standardising part of the lexicon: the development of NGT materials in different regional variants was expensive. Moreover, hearing parents and teachers were not inclined to learn different regional variants. The schools for the Deaf were also in favour of national NGT materials that could be used in NGT tests to monitor the development of linguistic skills and to set a national standard. The idea of standardisation, however, met with strong opposition from the Deaf community and from linguists in the Netherlands at that time. Probably, the concept of standardisation was difficult for the Deaf community to accept since it was not so long ago that their language had been suppressed by hearing people. And now again, it was hearing people who were enforcing some form of standardisation.

The STABOL project was carried out by a group of linguists, native deaf signers (mostly deaf teachers), and native hearing signers in close cooperation with the Deaf community and coordinated by the Dutch Sign Centre. A network of Deaf signers from different regions was established. This network in turn maintained contacts with larger groups of Deaf people whose comments and ideas were shared with the project group, which made all of the final decisions. Within the project, a standard sign was defined as a sign that will be used nationally in schools and preschool programs for deaf children and their parents. It does not mean that other variants are not ‘proper signs’ that the Deaf community can no longer use. (Schermer 2003, 480)
5.1. Method of standardisation

The STABOL project set out to standardise a total of 5000 signs: 2500 signs were selected from the basic lexicon, which comprises all signs that are taught in the first three levels of the national NGT courses; 2500 signs were selected in relation to educational subjects. For this second group of signs, standardisation was not a problem since these were mostly new signs with very little or no variation. We will expand a little more on the first set of 2500 signs.

The process of standardising NGT started in the early 1980s with the production of national sign language dictionaries which included all regional variants and preference signs. Preference signs are those signs that are identical in all five regions in the Netherlands (Schermers/Harder/Bos 1988). Discussions amongst members of the STABOL project group revealed that the procedures we had used in previous years (selection of preference signs) had actually worked quite well. The STABOL project group decided to use the set of linguistic guidelines in their meetings that had been developed based on previous research (see Schermers (2003) for details). In principle, signs that were the same nationally (i.e. those that were labelled “preference signs” in the first dictionaries) were accepted as standard signs. The 2500 signs from the basic lexicon that were standardised in the STABOL project can be characterised as follows:

- 60% of the signs are national signs that are recognised and/or used with the same meaning in all regions, no regional variation;
- 25% of the signs are regional signs that have been included in the standard lexicon;
- for 15% of the signs, a selection was made for a standard sign.

![Fig. 37.1: Regional NGT variants included as synonyms](image-url)
Hence, for 25% of the signs, regional variation was included in the standard lexicon in the following ways. First, regional variation is included in the standard lexicon in the form of synonyms. This is true, for example, for the signs CAREFUL and MUMMY shown in Figure 37.1. The reason for including these regional signs as synonyms was the fact that the members of the STABOL group could not agree on one standard sign based on the set of criteria. In this manner, a great number of synonyms were added to the lexicon.

Apart from synonyms, regional variation is included through refining the meaning of a sign; for example, the signs HORSE and RIDE-ON-HORSEBACK, BAKER and BAKERY. In the Amsterdam region, the sign HORSE (Figure 37.2b) was used for both the animal and the action of riding on a horseback. In contrast, in the Groningen region, the sign HORSE (Figure 37.2a) was only used for the animal and not for horseback riding. In the standardisation process, the Groningen sign became the standard sign HORSE while the Amsterdam sign became the standard sign for RIDE-ON-HORSEBACK (Figure 37.2b). Consequently, both regional variants were included.

In the STABOL project, for only a few hundred signs out of the 2500 standardised signs, an explicit choice was made between regional variants based on linguistic criteria as mentioned earlier in this chapter. One of the reasons that the NGT standard lexicon has been accepted by teachers of the Deaf who had to teach standard signs rather than their own regional variants, might be the fact that the actual number of signs that has been affected by the standardisation process is quite low. Note, however, that the standard lexicon was introduced in the schools for the Deaf and in the NGT course materials; the Deaf adult population continued to use regional variants. It is interesting to note that Deaf children of Deaf parents who are aware of the fact that there is a difference in signing between their Deaf parents, their Deaf grandparents, and themselves and who have been educated with the standard signs, identify with these standard signs as their own signs (Elferink, personal communication).

5.2. Results and implementation

As a result of the STABOL project, 5000 signs were standardised and made available in 2002. Since then, the Dutch Sign Centre has continued to make an inventory of
signs, to develop new lexicon, and to disseminate NGT lexicon. The database currently contains 16,000 signs of which 14,000 have been made available in different ways.

In Figure 37.3, the distribution of these 14,000 signs is shown: 25% of the standard signs have been standardised within the STABOL project, 42% of the signs are existing national signs (no regional variation), and 33% of the signs are new lexical items (mostly signs that are used in health and justice and for school subjects).

![Diagram showing distribution of signs]

Fig. 37.3: Distribution of signs in NGT standard sign language dictionaries

Naturally, the establishment of a standard sign alone is not sufficient for standardising a lexicon, the implementation of the NGT standard lexicon is coordinated by the Dutch Sign Centre and involves several activities, some of which are on-going:

- Workshops were organised to inform the Deaf community and NGT teachers about the new lexicon.
- The lexicon was dispersed via DVD-ROMs and all national NGT course materials have been adapted to include standard signs.
- All schools for the Deaf have adopted the standard lexicon and all teachers are required to learn and teach standard NGT signs since 2002.
- On television, only standard signs are used by the NGT interpreters.
- The NGT curriculum that was developed for primary deaf schools also contains standard NGT signs.
- Since 2006, online dictionaries are available with almost 14,000 standard signs. As of 2011, regional variants are also shown in the main online dictionary. The dictionaries are linked to the lexical database; both the dictionaries and the database are maintained by the Dutch Sign Centre and updated daily.
- In 2009, the first national standard NGT dictionary (3000 signs) has been published in book form (Schermers/Koolhof 2009), followed by the online version with 3000 sign movies and 3000 example sentences in NGT (2010).

Some people view the production of dictionaries with standard signs as avoiding the issue of regional variation altogether (see chapter 33, Sociolinguistic Aspects of Variation and Change). This is not the case in the Netherlands: in the 1980s, an inventory of regional variation was made based on a large corpus and, contrary to most other countries at that time, our first sign language dictionaries contained all regional variants. Without thorough knowledge of lexical variation, standardisation of NGT lexicon and the implementation of the standard signs in all schools for the deaf and teaching materials would not have been possible. In 2011, a large project was initiated by the
Dutch Sign Centre to include films of the original data that were collected in 1982 in the database and make the regional variation available in addition to the standard lexicon.

Note finally that, despite the fact that the basic lexicon of NGT was standardised in 2002, the Dutch Government still has not recognised NGT legally as a language. There are a number of implicit legal recognitions in the Netherlands, such as the right to have NGT interpreters and the establishment of the NGT teacher/interpreter training programme, but this is not considered to be a legal recognition of NGT as a language used in the Netherlands. An important reason why NGT has not been legally recognised within the Dutch constitution is that spoken Dutch is not officially recognised as a language in the Dutch constitution either. The Dutch Deaf Council and the Dutch Sign Centre are still working on some form of legal recognition of NGT as a language.

6. Lexical modernisation

For almost a century, throughout Western Europe, most sign languages have been forbidden in the educational systems and have not been used in all parts of society. At least the latter is also true for sign languages of other continents. As a consequence, there are deficiencies in the vocabulary compared to the spoken languages of the hearing community. The recognition of sign languages, the introduction of bilingual programmes in deaf education, and the continuing growth of educational sign language interpreting at secondary and tertiary levels of education have created an urgent need for a coordinated effort to determine and develop new signs for various contexts, such as, for example, signs for technical terms and school subjects.

A productive method for coining new signs is to work with a team of native deaf signers, (deaf) linguists, and people who have the necessary content knowledge. Nice examples of a series of dictionaries — aimed at specific professions for which new signs had to be developed — are the sign language dictionaries produced by the Arbeitsgruppe Fachgebärden (‘team for technical signs’) at the University of Hamburg. In the past 17 years, the team has compiled, for instance, lexicons on psychology (1996), carpentry (1998), and health care (2007).

In the Netherlands, the NGT lexicon has been expanded systematically since 2000. A major tool in the development and the dispersion of new lexical items is a national database and an online dictionary, all coordinated by one national centre, the Dutch Sign Centre. The Dutch Ministry of Education is funding the Dutch Sign Centre specifically for maintaining and developing the NGT lexicon. This is crucial for the development of (teaching) materials, dictionaries, and the implementation of bilingual education for deaf children.

7. Acquisition planning

As described before, acquisition planning concerns the teaching and learning of languages. Some form of acquisition planning is required to change the status of a language and to ensure the survival of a language. Ideally, a nationally funded institute
or academy (such as, for instance, the Académie Française for French or the Fryske Academie for Frisian) should coordinate the distribution of teaching materials, the development of dictionaries and grammars, and the development of a national curriculum comparable to the European Framework of Reference for second language learning. Even though the situation has improved greatly for most sign languages in the last 25 years, their position is still very vulnerable and in most countries depends on the efforts of a few individuals. Acquisition planning, corpus planning, and status planning are very closely related. With respect to sign languages, in most cases, there is no systematic plan in relation to these three types of planning. While there is not one plan that suits all situations, there are still some general guidelines that can be followed:

- Describe the state of affairs with respect to status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning in your country.
- Identify the stakeholders and their specific interest in relation to sign language; for example: sign language users (Deaf community, but also hard of hearing people who use a form of sign-supported speech), educationalists, care workers, researchers, parents of deaf children, hearing sign language learners, interpreters, government, etc.
- Identify the needs and goals of each of the stakeholders that need to be achieved for each of the types of planning and make a priority list.
- Identify the steps that need to be taken, the people who need to be involved and who need to take responsibility, estimate the funding that is necessary, and provide a timetable.

Acquisition planning is crucial for the development and survival of sign languages and should be taken more seriously by sign language users, researchers, and governments than has been done to date. It is time for a National Sign Language Academy in each country, whose tasks should include the preservation of the language, the protection of the rights of the language users, and the promotion of the language by developing adequate teaching materials.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter, three aspects of language planning have been described for sign languages: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. Within status planning, in most countries the focus of attention is usually on the legal recognition of the national sign language. In the year 2011, only 42 countries have legally recognised a national sign language in one way or another. Even though legal recognition may imply some form of protection for sign language users, it does not solve all problems. As more and more linguists point out, sign languages are endangered languages. Ironically, now that sign languages are finally taken seriously by linguists and hearing societies, their time is almost up as a consequence of the medical perspective on deafness and rapid technological development. Languages only exist within language communities, but the existence of signing communities is presently at risk for several reasons, the main one being the decreasing number of native deaf signers around the world. This
decrease is a consequence of reduced or no sign language use with deaf children who received a cochlear implant at a very young age and, more generally, of the fact that deaf communities are increasingly heterogeneous.

With respect to corpus planning, we have discussed standardisation and lexical modernisation. Standardisation of languages in general is a controversial issue. There are only few examples of efforts to standardise a sign language. At the same token, one has to be aware of the fact that any form of codification of a language implies some form of standardisation, even unintentionally. The process of standardisation of the NGT lexicon has been discussed as an example of a specific form of standardisation, based on thorough knowledge of the lexical variation existing in the language.

Finally, in order to strengthen the position of sign languages around the world, it is necessary to work closely together with the Deaf community, other users of sign language, and researchers — within different countries and globally — in an attempt to draft an acquisition plan, to provide language learners with adequate teaching materials, and to describe and preserve the native languages of deaf people.

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