

Deaf studies in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this paper we present an overview of the issues related to the Deaf community, to sign language and Deaf Studies in the Netherlands over the past 25 years. Furthermore we discuss some of the developments with respect to the status of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) such as two major projects KOMVA and the standardisation project STABOL. We make a distinction between issues related to sign language policies or rather policies regarding deaf people and issues related to sign language planning, and paint a picture of sign language research and of the beginning of Deaf awareness. We conclude that, despite the tremendous improvement of the status of sign language in the Netherlands in the past 25 years, the position of Deaf people actually has not visibly improved. We need much more focus on the position of deaf people in our society and structured research on Deaf culture is needed in the near future. The field of Deaf studies is still relatively new in our country but offers possibilities to support a fuller participation of the Deaf in Dutch society.

Key words

Sign linguistics, Deaf Studies, Empowerment, NGT.

Biographies

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Introduction

In this paper we present an overview of the issues related to the Deaf community, to sign language and Deaf Studies in the Netherlands over the past 25 years. Furthermore we will discuss some of the more recent developments with respect to the status of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). We make a distinction between issues related to sign language policies or rather, policies regarding deaf people and issues related to sign language planning, and paint a picture of sign language research and of the beginning of Deaf awareness.

Policies regarding deaf people in the Netherlands

With the exception of Tervoort (1953) no one until the late seventies referred to the unique way in which deaf people in our country were communicating amongst themselves in terms of a visual language, let alone a sign language. The powers in deaf education have played a crucial role in forming and maintaining the views on deafness within the hearing and deaf communities over the past century. We can distinguish four main periods:

The oral period (1880 – 1980)

The total communication period (1980- 1995)

The bilingual period (1995- 2004)

The monolingual/bimodal period (2004- present)

Main priority within deaf education in the Netherlands for almost a century was for the deaf pupils to become -as much as possible- a hearing person. In order to reach this goal the main focus in deaf education was on learning how to speak and to lip-read. There was no mention at all, of course, of Deaf Culture. This has had consequences for the status of sign language. Both in the eyes of deaf people and of hearing people the sign language of the Netherlands did not exist in a linguistic sense, despite the fact that deaf people around the schools for the deaf have been using sign language at least since 1790, when the first school for the Deaf was established in Groningen by Henri Daniël Guyot (Betten 1990). The word 'deaf' had only one meaning: "handicapped in the medical sense: something is missing and needs to be repaired" and this was crucial for the way in which deaf people were approached. The oral period came to an end around 1979, when Conrad's book (1979) was published and when parents of young deaf children were informed about sign languages being real languages. From the beginning of the 1980s parents of deaf children in the Netherlands began exerting pressure to effect a change in family counselling – they demanded more insight into the use of signs with their children. From 1985-1986 onward the interest in sign language became manifest in special education. This also opened up the possibilities to discuss whether or not there was a Deaf culture in the Netherlands. The five established schools could no longer avoid the issue of using signs in the education of deaf children. During the period 1980-1995 most schools for the deaf in the Netherlands applied the philosophy of Total Communication in their teaching methods. In practice this meant that hearing teachers were learning signs and they used signed Dutch, sometimes supported by signs, in the classrooms. Moreover, deaf people were introduced into the classrooms, first as teaching assistants, later as teachers. The influx of signing children from the parent guidance programmes into the schools led to changes in the educational methods, at first in two schools but spreading to all schools towards the end of the 1990s. By 1995 all schools for the deaf officially became bilingual schools. More and more deaf signers were hired as teachers and the percentage of deaf personnel in the schools increased rapidly between 1995 and 2000.

Since the beginning of this century the number of very young children with a cochlear implant has increased drastically. Again, pressure from parents – supported by the medical specialists - has forced schools for the deaf to change their language policies: bilingualism is still the official policy in most schools. However, most of the time the children are not exposed to sign language but to a form of signed Dutch. It might seem as if this is a return to the oral period, or the period of Total Communication, but there is a difference: the deaf children with a cochlear implant have better access to spoken Dutch than deaf children in the past with traditional hearing aids, so they have better chances of becoming truly bilingual, provided they are offered both spoken and sign language. Several studies have recently been done into the social-emotional development of this youngest generation of deaf children (See Isarin 2006).

Crucial in the developments in the eighties and nineties was the close cooperation between the Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Child (NSDSK), who initiated a new approach to parents counselling and introduced communication courses as part of the programme for hearing parents of deaf children, the Dutch Deaf Council (which was established in 1977) and the University of Amsterdam. A major change in the attitude of deaf people towards their own language and their own position in the hearing world occurred in 1985 when the Second European Congress on Sign Language Research in Noordwijkerhout in Holland introduced the deaf people in our country to general linguistics and to insights from sign language research (Tervoort 1986). A few years later some of these deaf teachers visited the first Deaf Way International Conference in Gallaudet, Washington in 1989, which

influenced them to such an extent that they wanted to teach sign *language* instead of lists of signs, and which inspired them to create poems in their own language (Emmerik 1995).

The word “deaf” had acquired a second meaning and became Deaf, referring to deaf people as a cultural and linguistic minority. We can thus place the first stirring of Deaf Studies in the Netherlands in 1985. But it would still take a long time before this term was used, and before research on aspects of Deaf Studies would begin.

As a consequence of the emancipation process that was taking place in the deaf community, there was an increasing need for interpreters. Until then mainly hearing Codas (children of deaf adults) who had grown up with sign language, or professionals who had become good communicators with deaf people, were used as interpreters. In the second half of the 1980s the representative body of deaf people, the *Dovenraad*, received money to set up an experiment with paid interpreters for the deaf. In 1988 deaf people obtained the right to ask for an interpreter: 18 hours per year for private affairs, maximally 10% of work time, and as many hours as needed in education (www.dovenschap.nl). The people working as interpreters wanted to receive training as professional interpreters, also because of the increasing difficulty of and variety in situations in which they were asked to interpret. In 1984 a middle level vocational training for interpreters was started, originally with a two year programme, which was later extended to three years. Slowly the focus changed from lexicon teaching to language teaching, and the native NGT teachers were more and more in need of grammatical training. The Dutch Sign Language Centre, which was founded in 1992 started to train deaf native sign language users as teachers of NGT. However, as more and more people with no background in NGT were enrolled in the interpreter education, the need for a different way of teaching NGT and interpreter skills became evident. As a consequence the three year interpreter programme was cancelled in 1995.

In 1997 the Ministry of Education granted permission to start a four year teacher and interpreter programme for NGT. A start was made with two pilot groups, 32 students in all. Because at this time there was no official method to teach NGT, the Dutch Sign Language Centre took the responsibility of developing a NGT curriculum, which was implemented at the school in the course of 1998 (van den Bogaerde 2007). From the start results of studies and publications done on NGT were implemented into the curriculum (e.g. Schermer 1990; Knoors 1992; Coerts 1992; Bos 1993) as well as studies on didactics of NGT and interpreting skills (Cokely 1984; Friedberg 1986; Roy 2000)

Sign Language research, language planning.

Two major projects have influenced the status of NGT and the emancipation of the deaf community in the past 27 years: the KOMVA project (1982-1990) and the STABOL project (Standardisation of Basic lexicon 1999-2002). We will briefly discuss both projects.

The KOMVA-project (1982-1990)

Research into NGT started around 1980. The attitude towards signing changed at that time under the influence of the Total Communication philosophy. The pressure from the Dutch parent organisation (FODOK) to collect signs for parents and deaf children led to the initiation of a large project to make an inventory of the signs used by Deaf people in the Netherlands. This project - the KOMVA project - was carried out by the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Child (NSDSK). There were five schools for the Deaf in the Netherlands, spread around the country. Despite the fact the signing had not been allowed since the beginning of the twentieth century, deaf people used sign language amongst themselves, whenever they were out of sight of hearing

people. Goal of the KOMVA project was to make an inventory of signs used by deaf people in the Netherlands in order to compile a bilingual -written Dutch/NGT- dictionary for parents and teachers of deaf children.

Results of the KOMVA project

The meetings with deaf people around the country yielded 15.000 signs on videotapes. All signs were described in a phonetic notation system that was based on a system that was developed and used by a deaf sign language teacher and on the Stokoe system (KOMVA Notatiesysteem 1982).

The inventory of signs and the subsequent comparison had shed more light on the variation of the lexicon of NGT. The dictionary we compiled based on these data incorporated initially all regional variations. Based on the analysis of KOMVA data we wanted to accomplish two things in our dictionaries:

- to account for variation as much as possible and
- to try to help the process of unification at the same time

Therefore, we selected signs that were common to *all* regions and decided to label them “preference signs”. For the number of concepts we discussed in our comparison study, this meant that half of them had a preference sign.

The decision was made to list the preference signs in first position in the dictionary; any variants follow in second and third positions. We also decided to make the regional variation explicit in the dictionary: for each sign the regional background was indicated by a letter referring to the name of a region (see Figure 1 for an example).

The results can be found in the first national dictionary of NGT that was produced for parents of young deaf children “Handen uit de Mouwen” (KOMVA 1988) and subsequently the basic dictionary of signs Basisgebarenschat” (KOMVA 1989).

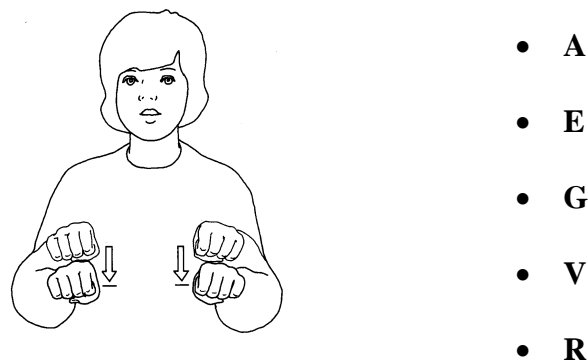


Figure 1 shows an example from the dictionary “Handen uit de Mouwen”, 1988. The sign TO-SIT is used in all regions as is indicated by the dot in front of the letters. The letters stand for the different regions Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Groningen, Voorburg and Rotterdam.

A side effect of this way of compiling a dictionary is the fact that users may fill in gaps. For example: four regions used the same sign for a number of different colour terms. The region in the North however used a range of different signs for different colours. By providing users with this information, NGT learners in the West and South started to copy the Northern signs. Ten years later, the Northern signs had become nationally used signs.

From books to CD-Rom’s

Around 1993 the CD-Rom technology came within our reach and offered tremendous possibilities. With additional funding the Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Child and the Dutch Sign Language centre were able to produce the first bilingual CD-Rom for parents and teachers of Deaf children containing Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) and written Dutch. The first CD-Rom was produced in 1996; the second in 1997 and the third in 1999 (Schermer, Pauluis and Emmerik 1996, 1997; Schermer, Geuze and Emmerik 1999). The CD-Rom's draw on the technology that was developed in the TIDE-project¹ but is not linked directly to the Signbase database. A new, simpler database was developed. At first the CD-Rom's contained only signs from the region South/West. The reason for this was that the CD-Rom's were not intended to be used nationally. At that time computers and CD-Rom's were not widely available. However, we were surprised by the success of the CD-Rom's and it became evident that we should have taken the signs from the North into account as well. Teachers and parents as well as Deaf people in the North felt very much neglected. The next series of CD-Rom's that were produced did contain both regional variants (GIDS, 1998).

Standardisation of the lexicon of NGT

Since the beginning of the 1980's the organisation for the Deaf in the Netherlands (Dutch Deaf Council) has fought for recognition of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) as the official language of deaf born or early-deafened Deaf people. An important incentive of course was the European Parliament's advice in 1988 to its member states to officially recognize their sign languages. Around 1995 the lobby for the recognition NGT became more powerful as the need for recognition was acknowledged by a wide group of organisations and institutions: the organisation for Parents of Deaf children (FODOK), all schools for the Deaf, the Dutch Sign Language centre and the University of Amsterdam. In 1996, as a result of the pressure of the joined forces the Dutch government (the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Welfare) installed a committee to investigate all of the aspects of an official recognition of NGT (see also below). The committee was asked to recommend possible ways to bring this recognition about. The report titled "Méér dan een gebaar" was published in 1997 (Commissie Nederlandse Gebarentaal 1997). It contained numerous recommendations to the government for improving the situation of Deaf people in different areas of society such as education, work, family life, access to news media (television, newspapers and the Internet), mobility and interpreters. The commission advised the government to recognize NGT as an official language. One of the arguments stated in the report is that Deaf children are entitled to bilingual education, that is education in spoken and written Dutch and NGT. The fact that since 1995 all schools for the Deaf in the Netherlands began to provide Deaf children with education in both NGT and Dutch was a major factor in convincing the government that it should allocate funds for the development of educational materials.

Following the report's recommendations, the Dutch Government funded a steering committee for three years. The committee consisted of representatives from the Dutch Deaf Council, the Parent organisation, all schools for the Deaf, the Dutch Sign language Centre and the University of Amsterdam among others. This committee was to carry out three major projects:

¹Signbase is a British/Dutch project that was funded by the European Community under the TIDE programme. Its main objective has been to build a sign language database, which can be used to store linguistic information about a particular sign language. This repository then can be used to generate different types of signed language applications. The project commenced in March 1994 and ended in December 1996. The consortium consisted of people from three different places: the Deaf Research Unit in Durham, UK (DSRU), the Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Child (NSDSK) in Amsterdam and Bright Side of Life computer consultancy (BSL) in Maarssen.

- The Standardisation of the Basic Lexicon of NGT to be used in schools for the Deaf (this project was called the “STABOL” project);
- The production of a Basic Grammar of NGT for teachers on CD-Rom;
- The design of a curriculum for both teaching NGT as a second language and Deaf Culture.

The Dutch Sign Language Centre has been involved in all three of the projects; the University of Amsterdam was responsible for the grammar project and all schools for the Deaf were involved in the design and production of the NGT curriculum (Werkgroep Sprong Vooruit 2005).

Stabol-project (1999-2002)²

The standardisation of the NGT lexicon was a very controversial issue among many people. As far as the Dutch Government was concerned it was not negotiable: without a standard lexicon there could be no legal recognition of NGT. The idea of standardisation has met with strong opposition in the Deaf community and from researchers. Both Deaf people and linguists tried to explain to civil servants at the Department of Education, politicians and secretaries of State that standardising the lexicon of NGT would not be necessary for recognition of NGT as a language. All in vain. “How could the government recognize a language if there was no official standard?” was their argument. A major problem for the government is the fact that no written form of NGT exists. There is no standard spoken Dutch, only a standard written form of Dutch. For some reason when a sign language is involved, some people seem to have a major problem in understanding the concept of a natural language.

We therefore decided to be practical by proposing a compromise: only the basic lexicon to be used at schools for the Deaf and new signs were to be standardised up to about five thousand signs.

In order to carry out the task of standardising signs, we established a project group: Linguists, native deaf signers and native hearing signers drew up a set of guidelines based on the experiences within previous dictionary projects (see Schermer 1990).

A major concern was the reaction of the Deaf community to this project. We wanted the Deaf community to be involved in the process and to be a part of the project, so that everyone would understand the issues. To accomplish this we established a network of Deaf signers from different regions. This network in turn maintained contacts with larger groups of Deaf people whose comments and ideas would be shared with the project group which made all of the final decisions.

The basis for the choices that were made formed a set of (linguistic) guidelines, which we shall not discuss here (see for further information Schermer 2003). Important to bear in mind is the definition of a standard sign in our project.

“A standard sign is one that will be used nationally in schools and pre-school programs for deaf children and their parents. It does not mean that other variants are no longer ‘proper signs’ that the Deaf community can no longer use.” (Schermer 2003: 480)

This turned out to be a crucial factor in the acceptance of the notion of standard signs by the Deaf community. It also came up in the first meeting we had. The sign for “standardisation”

² Many people are involved in the Stabol project: Corine den Besten, Bea Bouwmeester, Ellen Buisman, Wim Emmerik, Jacobien Geuze, Rita Harder, Ilse Jobse, Geert de Jong, Corline Koolhof, Beppy Maljers, Elly Meijer, Sarah Muller, Trude Schermer, Arie Terpstra, Maarten Vreugdenhil, Yfke van der Woude.

could also be translated as “to decide”. The deaf participants in the project group however felt that this sign, as is shown below in Figure 2, did not represent their interpretation of the term standardisation adequately.

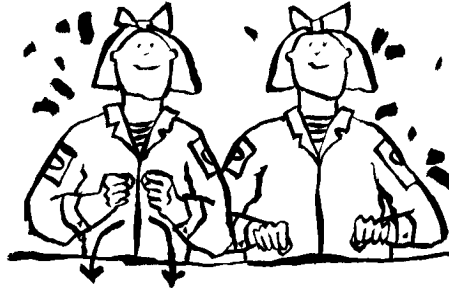


Figure 2 STANDARDISATION / DECIDE/ DECISION

Another sign was made up, which did represent the actual meaning much better, namely a sign which was agreed upon nationally (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 STANDARDISE / STANDARDISATION

The process of standardisation of Sign Language of the Netherlands started in the early eighties with the production of dictionaries (see above).

The discussions amongst members of the Standardisation project group demonstrated that the procedures we had used in the previous years (selection of preference signs) had actually worked quite well. Naturally it remains very important to point out that the standardisation of the basic lexicon for educational purposes does not rule out variation in a language: language change and language variation is inherent to language. Standardisation is only for economic and political purposes and should be valued as such, no more and no less. In retrospect we do see the advantages of having national NGT materials such as NGT courses and dictionaries. Between 2002 and 2007 a lot of new signs have been ‘developed’ and distributed via DVD-rom’s. Since 2006 there is an on-line electronic dictionary available³ that contains 7000 standard signs. This dictionary is attached to the national database that is maintained by the Dutch Sign Centre.

Research into NGT

In the Netherlands, research is funded either by the universities or research institutes, by the KNAW (Royal Institute of Academic Sciences) or through different systems of grants.

³ www.woordenboekgebaren.nl

Another possibility is that research is paid by commercial or private institutions. Most of the research done on NGT was situated initially at the Dutch Foundation for the Hard of Hearing Child (NSDSK) and the University of Amsterdam, later at the University of Leiden and recently also at the universities of Nijmegen and Utrecht. Applied research is also carried out by the research centres of Viataal and KEGG (Pontem) and the Dutch Sign Centre. Traditionally research on morpho-syntaxis and language acquisition is done in Amsterdam. Professor in General Linguistics Ben Tervoort wrote his thesis in 1953 on the esoteric language used by deaf children, and within the department of General Linguistics he facilitated research into the communication modes of the deaf. He was succeeded in 1988 by Anne Baker, who was officially appointed the first chair in Sign Linguistics in 1998. The first dissertation on NGT was published by Trude Schermer in 1990, titled *In search of a language*. She established for once and for all that NGT was a fully fledged, natural language. Harry Knoors did research on the language forms used by deaf children in the school in Rotterdam (Exploration of the signing space, 1992), and that same year Jane Coerts presented research on non-manual markers in NGT. In 1987 a longitudinal study on sign language acquisition was started, which resulted, amongst other publications, in the thesis of Van den Bogaerde (2000) on Input and Interaction in deaf families.

After the publication of these first theses in Amsterdam, and increasing exposure of NGT in the media, more and more people became interested in the study of NGT. In 1991 the NSDSK published a first book on NGT for parents and professionals, which functions as a major book of reference even today (Schermer et al. 1991). Another popular book on NGT was written by Tony Bloem (1993/2005), a deaf Coda, in collaboration with ViTaal co-workers Ruud Janssen, Albert van de Ven and Liesbeth Koenen. In Leiden, Harry van der Hulst started investigating the phonology of NGT (e.g. Van der Hulst, 1993) and students of his, Crasborn and Van der Kooij, finished their theses in 2001 and 2002 respectively. The latter two researchers have in recent years moved to the Radboud University of Nijmegen, where they continue to do research on NGT in close collaboration with Deaf co-researchers. Several other researchers are linked to universities, but do their research at the schools for the deaf that also fund their research. Nini Hoiting in Groningen follows deaf children of hearing and deaf parents and studies the acquisition of NGT (e.g. 2002), and Harry Knoors and his colleagues in St. Michielsgestel started a Research Department, where several projects have been set up (see www.ivd.nl), for instance on language acquisition, and on educational and health matters. Since 2004 Knoors holds the Chair in 'Education of the prelingually audively handicapped' at Radboud University. Recent research has been done by Connie Fortgens (2003), Inge Zwitserlood (2003) and Ingeborg van Gijn (2004), on language choice, classifiers and complex sentences in NGT, respectively. Loes Wauters wrote her dissertation on writing skills in Dutch deaf children (2005) and Victoria Nyst just finished her research on Adamarobe Sign Language (2007), which also deals with aspects of Deaf culture.

In all NGT research deaf people were involved. However, so far there are no officially trained deaf researchers with a PhD in sign linguistics or Deaf Studies in the Netherlands. The native signers that were involved in NGT research in the early days were Wim Emmerik, Diny Visch, Bea Visser, Martie Koolhof, Rosé ter Linden en Elly Meijer, and also hearing codas Arie Terpstra and Corline Koolhof. These native signers, and many others, were trained on the job, and have contributed greatly to the research on their language and their culture. The early research found its way to the deaf community and the professional field, but in later years this has proven to be more difficult. Researchers sometimes write brief articles on NGT issues, but the dissemination of research results is just not happening enough. For instance, early research done on the language acquisition of children with a Cochlear Implant (Coerts &

Baker 1995) showed, that a bilingual approach would benefit these children the most. However, after publication, no action was taken at the time. Children with CI were still, and are, commonly put in monolingual educational programs, which often excludes the option for bilingualism for these children (but see Knoors 2006). We actually still do not know how to teach deaf children in such a way that they have the same chances as their hearing peers. It is worrying that research results do not find their way not only *not* into the deaf community but also not into the echelons of decision makers (see also above with regard to the standardisation process). Or rather, results do find their way, but are too often ignored. It is high time that researchers, professionals and the deaf community together make an effort to convince policy makers that NGT and all it entails for the deaf community deserves their attention.

In the next section we will discuss the beginnings of Deaf awareness in the Netherlands, and the start of Deaf Studies.

Deaf Awareness and Deaf Studies

In 1981 a nowadays very popular journal called *Woord en Gebaar* [Word and Sign] was founded, in which news and events relevant for deaf people are given. They present themselves as follows:

“Woord en Gebaar is the only independent, national deaf journal of the Netherlands. We inform you about news and activities that are important to the deaf world. The journal provides interviews with experts and news for the young, and we inform you about events. All this emphasised from a positive view on deafness.” (www.woordengebaar.nl, translation by authors).

Through *Woord en Gebaar*, deaf people can voice their opinions and strong deaf members of the Deaf community can vent their frustration with the lack of initiative from the deaf community (Pattipeiluhu 1995) or complain about interpreters (Stuifzand 2002) or talk about a strange (and nasty) phenomenon called *Surdophobia* (van Gils 1997) or tell us about how doctors treat deaf patients (as if they were ‘backwards’) (Davidson-Schadee 2004).

One of the first publications meant for the wider public about the Deaf community was made by Mohr & Janssen (1983). They produced a video called *Een blik op de dovenwereld* [Looking into the deaf world]. A year later Henk Betten, a deaf author, wrote a biography of Henri Daniël Guyot. And in 1985 Janssen and Tony Bloem together founded ViTaal, a design bureau for visual communication, the aim of which is to produce books and films in or on sign language and deafness, and to advocate Deaf culture. In 1990 the Handtheater was started by deaf actors, whose aim it was and is to make sign language and Deaf culture more visible to the community at large. The first deaf actors took their training at Gallaudet University, since at the time there was no theatre training for the deaf. Nowadays the Handtheater regularly provides theatrical trainings for deaf people.

From 1992 – 1999 the European Regional Secretariat of the World Federation of the Deaf (ECRS), later the European Union of the Deaf, was presided by Johan Wesemann, an influential leader in the Dutch Deaf community. His efforts and endeavors to support the Deaf and their rights to use sign language and have their own culture were a huge support to the development of a sense of Deaf identity in the Netherlands, as well as in other countries of the EU. He still contributes to the Deaf community (Wesemann 2006).

In 1997 Pascal Urbanis started a website (www.doof.nl) which proved to be an enormous boost for contact amongst the deaf digital natives (i.e. youngsters), along with other modern communication forms like chatting, MSN, YouTube or SMS. Also hearing professionals frequently visit this website to keep up with news from the Deaf community.

So from the early eighties onward, as the Deaf community in the Netherlands increasingly emancipated and hearing parents of deaf children came more and more into contact with NGT and its deaf (and hearing) users, people became aware of Deaf culture. The presence of more and more deaf teachers in the school, who function(ed) as role-models for the deaf and hard-of-hearing children contributed in an important way to the visibility of the Deaf in both the Deaf and the hearing communities. Increasingly, also, hearing professionals were taking a critical look at themselves and how they supported deaf children and adults. The first social study into the situation of deaf adults in relation to raising and educating deaf children was done in 1986 by Breed & Swaans-Joha. In 1990 Beck & De Jong wrote one of the first books to consider a deaf-friendly perspective in the advising procedures provided for hearing parents.

With the beginning of bilingual education for deaf children in the nineties of the last century, a need was felt to know more about Deaf Culture. Does it exist in the Netherlands, and if so, what are its characteristics? Both deaf and hearing parents and professionals wanted deaf children to come into contact with Deaf culture, whether they were in schools for the deaf or in mainstream schools. For instance, the NSDSK organised since the 1979 contact weekends for hearing parents and their deaf children, so that the children could meet other deaf children but also deaf adults, and come into contact with NGT in an informal and fun way. As the Deaf community became more visible, their growing needs to have NGT officially recognized as one of the official languages in the Netherlands led in 1997 to the publication of a large study into the consequences of such recognition (Commissie NGT 1997; see above). This committee that provided the necessary insights into prerequisites for recognition was installed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health Welfare and Social affairs. The committee provided 64 recommendations as to how NGT could be officially recognized, and what the consequences would be both for the private lives of deaf people, and for social, judicial, educational and (mental) health laws and regulations. Today, in 2007, NGT still is not officially recognized by the Dutch government despite the fact that there is a standard basic lexicon. One of the problems is the fact that even the Dutch language is not officially recognised in the Dutch constitution. This makes it impossible for NGT to be recognised as a language in the constitution. However, there are other ways being explored now to establish a legal position for NGT (for example the right to have NGT instruction in Deaf education or to have interpreters).

Also, even though NGT has not been recognized yet, in practise much has been done to empower the Deaf community and to stress the importance of NGT, e.g. the Dutch Sign Centre is funded by the Department of Education and recognised as the lexicography institute for NGT. From the 1980s onward the University of Amsterdam offered students the possibility to study the sign language of the Netherlands and these studies were not always solely restricted to linguistics. Nowadays they offer a bachelor and a master study in Sign Linguistics, and the Amsterdam Centre for Language and Communication (ACLC) of the UvA supports PhD research in this field. Since 1997 it is possible to get a bachelor's degree in teaching NGT and in NGT interpreting at the Institute for Sign, Language and Deaf Studies of the Hogeschool Utrecht. In 2004 it became possible to follow a master programme in Deaf Studies and to study for a master's degree Teacher of NGT at this same institute.

Very recently a few remarkable studies have been published, which all have had quite an impact on professionals, parents and on the Deaf community as a whole. Stuart Blume (2006), researcher and father of a deaf child, gives his personal view on his battle to accept the deafness of his child, and combines this with a in-depth discussion of the ethical issues as a

consequence of the application of modern medical techniques (in this case in particular cochlear implants). His personal story combined with his expertise as a scientist, emphasizes the fact that empowerment of the Deaf in the Netherlands has only just begun and that it is very hard for the Deaf to be heard in the hearing world, compared to the ubiquitous and powerful voice of the medical world. A second publication by Corrie Tijsseling, a deaf educationalist, who forcefully brought to the attention the utmost importance of raising deaf children with a sign language, or, preferably, to raise them bilingually so that the children have a language choice as adults. She ends her book as follows (translation by the authors):

“This new perspective views deaf children as people in whom cognition is primarily visually based. They are *visual* (author’s emphasis) people who usually have to grow up in an environment that is linguistically blind. Therefore, the most important factor in raising these children is not eradicating their assumed defect, but preventing that excluding mechanism called ‘deafheid’ (deafness). We should focus on the positive value of the experience of being: *Deafhood*. (2006: 111).

Last, a study by Jet Isarin, which she did together with young deaf and hard-of-hearing youngsters through MSN-interviews, brought to focus how young deaf children and adolescents (aged between 13 and 25) learn how to survive in the hearing world. She found four groups of youngsters, that she called a) lost, b) roaming, c) searching and d) bonded (2006: 48-50). We summarize briefly these four groups:

a) Lost

Lost deaf or hard-of-hearing youngsters are lonely, have few or no friends, do not feel at home anywhere, are isolated in their own home and do not feel at home at school. They have more or less lost the contact that they had with the hearing world when they were still playing. They have no perspective on contact with another world, and they seem to silently accept that.

b) Roaming

Roaming youngsters are less lonely than the lost ones. They do have contact with peers – at school, at home or via internet – but they make contradictory statements about these contacts. On the one hand they seem convinced that their hearing impairment does not bother them, but on the other hand they talk about being alone at home, or family members that talk too fast, too soft or unclear. They identify with a world in which they seem to move fairly confidently, but which, on closer view, shows cracks and holes. They work very hard to belong, but they do not know yet where they *want* to belong.

c) Searching

These youngsters can be lonely or not, are oriented on one world or not, may sign or speak, but they are all actively searching for an identity in which their hearing loss finds its own place, for worlds in which that identity gets defined and for contacts with people who, one way or another, can contribute to that feeling of belonging as a unique person.

d) Bonded

These are youngsters who have searched and found their way. They are beyond being ashamed for their hearing aids or their restrictions, they have thought and communicated about the meaning of being deaf or hard-of-hearing, about sign language and about the barriers they will encounter in the hearing world. Many of these youngsters are proud of what they have achieved and are of the opinion that adaptations should come from two sides.

This study has stirred up a lot of emotions in the Deaf community, especially for deaf and hard-of-hearing children and their hearing or deaf parents. But also professionals have been forced to take the opinions of these youngsters to heart, and to reflect on their own position as

a professional with regard to important issues like advising families in choosing a mode of communication with their deaf child that is appropriate for that child.

The Deaf community in the Netherlands is changing rapidly – as in many countries in Europe (see for instance Woll and Ladd 2003) – due to innovative technologies and new insights in education and care. The old days of an underground world of Deaf adults who meet in deaf clubs, amongst themselves, and use their own sign language are gone. Even though sign language is still being suppressed, empowerment of the Deaf should, even more so today, be a huge priority in the Deaf community. Deaf studies, in all its facets, will be an important instrument in supporting this aim.

Discussion

We have seen a major shift in the acceptance of NGT and the Deaf community by the Dutch society. In 1980 hardly anyone knew about a sign language or Deaf culture in the Netherlands; hardly anyone realised the importance of such a language in the lives of deaf people. Deaf people have become much more aware of the importance of their own language and they have fought for a better position of themselves and their language and culture within our society. Partly they have succeeded. However, the implementation of Cochlear Implants, Neonatal Screening and the tendency in Deaf education towards inclusion form clear threats for the position of NGT and its users. We do not want to further discuss these changes here. Fact is that there is only so much money to divide by our government. Subsidies in support of the use of NGT are not even closely comparable to the amounts that are spent on medical facilities such as cochlear implants. As a result of this, NGT is an endangered language at the moment. It is not protected by any law and as a consequence, the Deaf community in the Netherlands is threatened in its existence.

The generation of young deaf people who are now between 15 and 20 years of age has been brought up with NGT and spoken or written Dutch. The older generation never had this opportunity and the younger generations will not have it either, because the monolingual (almost oral) period seems to be back again, before bilingualism had the chance to be established solidly. A major force in all of this is the fact that since 1999, parents of a handicapped child can receive a budget for their child, which they may use for the education and care of their child according to their own ideas. This has both advantages and disadvantages: one of which is that parents have to find their way through the mazes of professionals who want to offer their assistance and their ideas on what is best for their deaf child.

We have great hopes that with the establishment of a Chair of Deaf Studies we can begin to do research into Deaf culture at long last in a systematic way in the Netherlands, and find ways in which science and education can support the empowerment of Deaf people, in all their variety, so that their full participation in our Dutch society will become possible. Hopefully the younger bilingual Deaf generation will take up the challenge and become active in shaping their own future and that of their community. Through research done by Deaf people into their own language and their own culture, Deaf Studies indeed will be owned by and be a benefit to the Deaf people in the Netherlands.

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