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In search of the ideal partnership between  
sign linguistics research and a bilingual teaching project  
The case of Namur, Belgium<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

This paper outlines findings from the pilot phase of work in an ongoing partnership between the University of Namur (Belgium) and the association *École et Surdit * (“School and Deafness”) also located in the city of Namur. The University of Namur has been supporting research in French Belgian Sign Language (Langue des Signes de Belgique Francophone (LSFB) since 2000. From 2000 to 2006, the university financially supported the first PhD-project on LSFB, which focused on the role of eye gaze in LSFB in morphology, syntax and enunciation (Meurant, 2008) and a second PhD is currently underway (2007-2013), focusing on time, modals and aspect in LSFB (Sinte 2009). At the same time, the association *École et Surdit * was founded in 2000 with the aim of setting up a pilot project for bilingual education for the deaf (de Halleux and Thoua 2009). By a stroke of luck, both the University and *École et Surdit * are located in Namur. Together they decided to seize this opportunity for collaboration.

The embryonic team at work at the University of Namur has thus created a research-action group on LSFB (Meurant and Zegers de Beyl 2009). Since 2004, this group has focused on LSFB as a language for teaching and as a subject taught in school. From the experience of this group, it appears that both research on sign linguistics and the bilingual education programme of *École et Surdit * gain significant mutual benefit from joint collaboration.

## 2. The bilingual teaching programme (LSFB – French) in Namur

The purpose of the bilingual education project of *École et Surdit * is to integrate groups of deaf pupils within classes of hearing pupils in a mainstream school. The project aims to provide deaf children with the opportunity to acquire LSFB and (written) French in natural situations and to give them an education comparable to their hearing peers. At the time of writing, 30 pupils are involved in the programme, from kindergarten (age 2 years, 6 months) to the first level of secondary school (age 12 years).

Such a programme is entirely new in the French-speaking part of Belgium: In all school situations (within the classroom, during playtime or sports classes, during interactions between children and in adult-child interactions), LSFB is the language used for oral (i.e. face to face) communication and French is the language used for written communication purposes. The oral performances of the children in production (their ability to pronounce French) or in comprehension (their ability to understand French through lip reading, via the help of Cued Speech or thanks to their auditory competencies) are neither developed nor

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Marie Zegers de Beyl for the numerous discussions and collaborations we shared on this topic. I also want to thank Thierry Haesenne for his careful correction of the English language of a previous version of this text, as well as Lorraine Leeson and Myriam Vermeerbergen for their rigorous proofreading.

assessed as a means to an end in themselves. The language of the curriculum is LSFb. That is, all school subjects are taught through LSFb: mathematics, science, human sciences, and the French language. All written supports are in French. In addition to the ordinary school programme, deaf pupils take a LSFb course (two hours every week), delivered by a native deaf signer.

The status of LSFb and French is not the same for all deaf children on this bilingual programme. Some of the students have deaf parents and use LSFb at home, with French having little or no place in family life. Others, on the opposite end of the spectrum, live in a hearing family where LSFb is never used. All possible permutations on the LSFb-French as primary language continuum are represented amongst the students registered on the programme: students include children who enter school with some skills in both languages to children who have had no access to either a spoken or a signed language before entering school. This linguistic heterogeneity is not specific to these bilingual classes, it reflects instead one of the features of the deaf community in the French Community of Belgium, and the various degrees of contact between the signed language and the spoken language of the majority. With regard to this complex linguistic situation, *École et Surdit * does not consider, for instance, that LSFb is the first language of the pupils and that French has to be taught as a second or foreign language: for some children, it is rather the opposite, and some others do discover both languages at the same time at school. From a linguistic point of view, what unites the deaf pupils is that signed language (unlike spoken language) is fully accessible for all of them and that it is possible for them to acquire it in natural situations.

When the bilingual classes of *École et Surdit * opened, it was the first time a whole school programme was going to be delivered in LSFb. Therefore, one could expect that a lot of (linguistic) questions would arise from this pioneering project: from the class settings, from the lesson planning and from the creation of evaluation and examination frameworks.

### **3. The university – school partnership under way**

In 2004, when the first deaf children in the programme arrived in primary school, a research-action group was created at the University of Namur. The aim was to offer the teachers skilled interlocutors equipped to help them solve the linguistic challenges they would face as they developed their approach to teaching through LSFb, and indeed, in teaching the language itself to the children. From the beginning, the group was made up of the bilingual classes teaching team (this comprised three people in 2004, and today the team numbers some twelve teachers), deaf signers who are skilled LSFb users, interpreters and the LSFb researchers at the university. Until 2009, the group met three times a month, on Fridays afternoon (3 x 2h). Since 2009, it has been meeting once a month, on a Wednesday afternoon (1 x 4h).

At the beginning, no one could imagine what the issues raised by the teachers would be. It transpired that the first main challenge concerned the specific vocabulary used in school subjects and the translation of poems, songs and narratives into LSFb.

Comparing content presented to the hearing pupils of the same school and considering what was expected from the hearing pupils, the teachers for the deaf were worried about what appeared to be a significant lexical gap in LSFb. For example, hearing pupils are expected to be able to define French words as *catadioptre* (reflector) or *hexagone*

(hexagon). If this task makes sense in French (because it leads to explanations in French of the meaning of the Greeks root from which the French words are created), it does not in LSF. The signs to say *catadioptré* or *hexagone* in LSF make the meaning (iconically) explicit in LSF itself, and not via means of reference to another (old) language. From then on, the teachers were forced, in order to be consistent with the use of LSF, to exempt deaf children from this kind of task.

Poems, songs and narratives are daily used in the French speaking classes. Following the model of their colleagues, the teachers for the deaf asked the group to help them translate the texts given to the hearing pupils. It is clear that the translation tasks involved metalinguistic reflections about the French texts and the linguistic and pedagogic objectives associated with the use of these texts with hearing children. Depending on the text, the translation could be built on a formal feature of the language: the research of rhyme effects (through the repetition of some manual features such as handshape, location or movement, or by the use of spatial contrasts, for example) or on the research of rhythmic plays. But it also occurred that the target of the translation was the theme of the original text, or the semantic or narrative structure of the original text. When the constraints identified for the translation were not related to a formal component of language but rather to a semantic feature of the original text, the group tried to insert in the translation some structures which are specific to LSF (object personification via constructed action (Metzger 1995) or personal transfer (Cuxac 2000), perspective alternations (Perniss 2007), spatial metaphors (Taub 2001), etc.).

During the first years, the deaf participants who were consulted on the basis of their LSF fluency were not familiar with the metalinguistic analysis necessary for this kind of translation exercise. In the beginning, for example, some of them looked suspiciously at the notions of rhyme and rhythm in a signed language, and perceived this as some form of artificial adoption of approaches from spoken language analysis. However, over the process of a period of two years, the group meetings were preceded by special sessions with only the deaf participants. These sessions were devoted to several activities on body rhythm, with the hands and in signed language, to some analysis of signed language poetry, to some poetic productions and to explanations about key concepts in signed language analysis (for example, the categories of Cuxac's iconicity model), etc.

When the teaching team was extended, the kinds of questions previously brought to the group meetings were also discussed by the teachers when back at school. With time, the questions raised changed, revealing among other things that the competencies developed within the group had been capitalized on. For example, the teachers overtly say that they now have methodological resources that make them more self-sufficient when it comes to translating poetic texts. But their needs are more oriented now towards the creation of poems directly in LSF. The teachers also feel more confident about more challenging exercises such as the adaptation of a story based on puns. The role of the group, in such cases, is no longer to think about the linguistic and methodological foundations of the task, but rather to gather the participants' ideas and to harness their creativity in order to fulfil the goals of the project (Baraté and Meurant 2009).

After five years of work, the teachers asked for the original concept of the group to be changed to reflect the current needs of the teaching team. Indeed, the teachers no longer felt under pressure with respect to lexical issues (i.e. vocabulary issues) or the translation of texts. Thus, there was no longer a need to have meetings three Fridays every month. Rather,

more general knowledge about signed language and signed language teaching, less tightly linked to current classroom activities were much in demand. In 2009 we implemented this new approach. Once a month, experts from Belgium and abroad (mostly from France) are invited to present one aspect of his/her research or of his/her practical experience in relation to signed language linguistics and bilingual education for the deaf. For example, experts from the Institut Libre Marie Haps, the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the Vlaamse GebarentaalCentrum (VGTC), the CNRS, the Université Paris 8 and the bilingual school for the deaf in Toulouse have come and shared their knowledge about various topics such as verb classification in LSF, the teaching of French grammar in a French as a Foreign Language perspective, the expression of plurality in VGT, various aspects of (the acquisition of) French Sign Language (LSF) by deaf children and teaching French literacy to deaf children.

Since September 2011, the monthly meetings have been devoted to the improvement of the LSF skills of the teachers. Each session consists of three parts. First, the bilingual classroom teachers have a lesson on LSF synonyms, meaning nuances, register differences, etc. and this is taught by two deaf teachers. Secondly, two teachers from *École et Surdit * show a video of a classroom situation and ask the group (i.e. their colleagues, the LSF teachers of the first part and the SL linguists from the university) to comment on their use of LSF within the sequence showed and to give them some advice on how to improve it. Thirdly, a summary of the two previous parts is signed and filmed as an aide memoire in LSF for teachers and this content also serves as an additional SL exercise.

Even though this new approach is more suitable for the now experienced teacher team, important issues are still raised which we do not yet have adequate answers for. These issues relate to the comparison of LSF and French and the contrastive teaching of both grammars; to methods of teaching French literacy without reference to French phonology and to ways of facilitating the acquisition of French vocabulary by children who have a limited immersion in (written) French, etc.

#### **4. Mutual collaboration borne of mutual necessity**

Beside this research-action partnership, LSF linguistics and the bilingual education program need each other and would benefit from a wider collaboration. At the time of writing, the shortage of people involved in sign linguistics and the lack of stable positions in sign linguistics in the French Community of Belgium inhibit the development of closer relations and the development of applied linguistics research. But the authors work toward changing this situation and hope to be able in the short to mid-term to launch the development of LSF studies guided by the needs and the interests of bilingual education<sup>2</sup>.

##### *4.1 The bilingual education programme calls for linguistic research*

The bilingual educational programme requires insights from linguistics because each moment in the education process relates to the comparison of both languages of the classroom, to the translation from one to the other and to the limits of both these tasks. The teachers need to master the capacity to deal with the comparison of both languages at various levels depending on their job. This feeds into their capacity to analyze the official

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<sup>2</sup> We are happy to say that some months ago it was decided that a permanent research position focusing on LSF linguistics will be funded by the FRS-FNRS at the University of Namur.

education programmes used in ordinary schools and to adapt these objectives to the particularities of the bilingual programme. They also draw on these skills in order to build the pedagogic and linguistic progression of their teaching subjects, their methods and their materials as well as when explaining aspects of one language in comparison to aspects of the other language. Another area where contrastive linguistic capacity is used is when they discuss the grammatical rules of LSF and French respectively. At the moment, teachers cannot support their intuitions by referring to any reference work or tool as there is none. This is one of the main facts that makes their job so challenging.

The particularity of deaf bilingualism challenges the approaches to teaching literacy in French which are generally based on the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. Whereas signed languages are accessible for all deaf children, the oral delivery of spoken languages (in comprehension and in expression) is not. Therefore, *École et Surdit * knows that some pupils will not be able to transfer their knowledge of French phonology to their progress in literacy. But so far very little has been published on trials, methodologies, materials or pedagogic tools about literacy without reference to phonology. Even the approaches undertaken in Sweden and France are not easily accessible unless one physically sees how the teachers practise. Most publications do not focus on the very first stages of the learning process, so there remains a gap in knowledge regarding what competencies teachers require in order to deliver the oft outlined pedagogic practices.

Among the difficulties faced by the deaf pupils on the bilingual programme in Namur, the acquisition of French vocabulary is particularly worrying. The pupils who cannot depend on auditory abilities show how difficult it is to memorize (in the mid- and long-term) French vocabulary when they only have access to the French language at school. This is true even if the words are discovered in a text, practised repeatedly and reused in writing tasks. The children's reduced immersion in French produces a performance inequality.

Each of these topics deserves further in-depth investigation and would make up a rich field for linguistics and applied linguistics research.

#### *4.2 The sign linguistic research needs the bilingual programme experience*

Conversely, the linguistics research team on LSF at the University of Namur is lucky to work alongside the bilingual project. The bilingual classes can be seen as a microcosm of the deaf community: the teachers and the children illustrate various (multi)linguistic situations, with various linguistic backgrounds related to various kinds of contact between LSF and French. At the same time, the status of LSF in the school is not that which LSF receives in the wider society, but is rather similar in status French has for the hearing pupils. Within the school, LSF is the language of communication and teaching between the adults and the deaf pupils, it is the language of communication between deaf and hearing colleagues and the language taught by a deaf native signer during the signed language classes.

All these characteristics shape the bilingual classes as a privileged place which gives rise to pointed linguistic and applied linguistic questions and facilitates the testing of same. LSF is used in a large variety of discourse types (as narratives, descriptive discourse, explicatory texts, and in argumentation), in a large variety of contexts (monologues, dialogues, group interactions) and for a large variety of subjects (everyday speech and scholarly subjects). This

rich use is not only valuable for the development of the language itself, but also for the linguistic description of the language and for its evolution.

## **5. What would the ideal partnership be?**

In the French Community setting, a partnership between the sign linguistics research team and the bilingual education project team would ensure an in-depth investigation in the field of both translation and comparative analysis for LSFb and French. This work should open research axes in applied linguistics in areas such as teaching methods and material development, with specific regard to literacy.

The linguistic description should consider the discourse and stylistic specificities of LSFb, in comparison with French structures, with respect to a variety of discourse types. Qualitative analysis of the specific context of subject specific classes delivered through the medium of LSFb where written content is delivered in French would be of great interest. Studies on literacy could entail a longitudinal perspective, with potential for enhancing the research field and improving pedagogic practice in the bilingual classroom. On a similar subject, one should test the potential for applying what is now known about the role of figurative thought and linguistic iconicity for vocabulary acquisition to LSFb-French bilingualism (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008).

In view of the emergent character of bilingual education in the French Community of Belgium, the partnership between the university and the bilingual school should provide support with respect to the implementation of educational programmes, of the school demands and evaluations for the teaching team in the bilingual programme. From the linguistic perspective, this process should be underpinned by a better knowledge of LSFb use and of the contrastive grammar of LSFb and French. It also has to take into account the specificities of deaf bilingualism, which implies bimodality (signed and spoken/written language) and the complex situation of biculturalism (cultures of the signing deaf minority and of the speaking hearing majority).

In this partnership, a crucial feature required is the active collaboration between members of the university research team, members of the school and individuals who would work as points of liaison between both institutions. The closer the collaboration between deaf and hearing researchers, the higher the quality of these studies will be. This twofold collaboration (between institutions and between deaf/hearing colleagues) should ideally pertain to each aspect of the partnership: from the linguistic research to the creation of pedagogic tools and materials.

## **6. Conclusion**

The bilingual education of deaf children and young people in the French Community of Belgium addresses rich, diverse, but also urgent issues in the field of sign linguistics. The author claims that, for scientific and for ethical reasons, the development of linguistic studies about LSFb (still an emergent research field in Belgium) must be tightly linked to the bilingual programme recently established in Namur. With regard to the collaboration in place since 2004 between the linguistics department of the University of Namur and the

bilingual classes of *École et Surdit *, the ideal partnership outlined in this article may be crucial for both partners.

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