

DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0565

УДК 16.21.27

## **Sociocultural and Linguistic Contexts of the Russian Sign Language Functioning in Krasnoyarsk Krai**

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**Abstract.** The article contains an ethnographic description of the conditions governing the use of the regional sign language in Krasnoyarsk Krai within the modern sociolinguistic context. The subject of the discussion is the problem of the linguistic design of sign languages in general, including some features of Russian Sign Language. The study provides statistical information and legal norms for the use of this iconic communication system. A study of the current state of Russian Sign Language functioning in Krasnoyarsk Krai allows us to talk about a change in the status of this sign language, an increasing interest in issues related to its applied significance, and reinforces the need to develop new theoretical approaches to its institutionalization.

**Keywords:** Russian Sign Language, fingerspelling, regional variants, Krasnoyarsk krai, language policy.

This research is supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), Grant No. 20-012-00321 “Regional sign languages: multimodal electronic corpus (the case of the communicative space of Eastern Siberia)”.

Research area: linguistics.

# **Социокультурный и лингвистический контексты функционирования русского жестового языка в Красноярском крае**

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**Аннотация.** В статье предлагается этнографическое описание условий функционирования регионального жестового языка на территории Красноярского края в современном социолингвистическом контексте. Обсуждается проблема лингвистического оформления жестовых языков в целом, в том числе некоторые особенности русского жестового языка. Приводятся статистические сведения и правовые нормы использования данной знаковой системы коммуникации в рамках исследуемого пространства. Изучение современного состояния функционирования русского жестового языка в Красноярском крае позволяет говорить об изменении статуса жестового языка и возрастающем интересе к вопросам, связанным с его прикладной значимостью и необходимостью выработки новых теоретических подходов к его институализации.

**Ключевые слова:** русский жестовый язык, дактилирование, региональные варианты, Красноярский край, языковая политика.

Публикация подготовлена при поддержке Российского фонда фундаментальных исследований (РФФИ): проект № 20-012-00321 «Региональные жестовые языки: мультимодальный электронный корпус (на материале коммуникативного пространства Восточной Сибири)».

Научная специальность: 10.02.00 – языкознание.

## **Introduction**

According to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 366 million people with disabling hearing loss in the world. These people represent 5% of the world's population. In the Russian Federation, 14.6 million people suffer from hearing loss of one degree or another, which makes up 10% of the country's population. Among them, 220 thousands are officially registered as hearing impaired. According to the data of the Social Welfare Authorities of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, the number of people with hearing disabilities reaches approximately 3,000. It is impossible to establish the exact number of deaf people, since statistics do not take into account the cases of obtaining the status of a disabled person as a result of other concomitant diseases. For a long time, sign languages used by the deaf as a means of communication were not qualified as full-fledged sign systems with the level organization not differing from spoken languages. According to ethnologue.com website, there are 144 living sign languages in the world, but it is also noted that this number is not accurate. Sign languages are practically not associated with spoken languages and develop naturally which distinguishes them from sign articulation. The linguistic investigation into sign languages began with a study of the sublexic structure of American Sign Language published by W. Stokoe (Stokoe, 1960) in 1960, and since then various linguistic descriptions, sociolinguistic studies, and comparisons

on this topic there have appeared. American Sign Language tends to be the most studied at the moment, but the sign languages of other countries are also the subject of numerous studies (Zeshan, 2006; Johnston, Schrempf, 2007; Lim Jia Ying, 2016). In Russia, sign language studies are closely connected with the works of G.L. Zaitseva (Zaitseva, 2000). She was the first to describe Russian Sign Language as a complex communicative system. In addition, she emphasized the importance of using sign language in teaching the deaf and insisted on the need for bilingual education with the mandatory use of Russian Sign Language.

Sign languages are sign systems in which information is encoded using hands, facial expressions, eyes, head and body positions. Thus, manual and non-manual signs are distinguished in linguistics of sign languages. Manual signs are performed with the help of hands and represent the most frequent type of signs. These can be one-handed or two-handed. Non-manual signs are performed with the help of the body, head and facial muscles. In addition, there are combined signs that merge manual and non-manual types. Studies describe a sign as a significant semantic unit with the specific structural organization. By analogy with phonemes in spoken languages, the American scientist W. Stokoe identified three main components of the sign: configuration, spatial position and movement (Stokoe, 1960). Later additional parameters, such as orientation (Battison, 1978) and non-manual markers (Valli, Lucas, 2000), were added. Even in the first works on the linguistics of sign languages, it was noted that sign languages have a complex morphology. Further studies showed that a specific feature of the morphological structure of sign languages is their simultaneous nature. Morphemes of a word are simultaneously superimposed on each other but not connected to each other, though this is quite common in spoken languages. Generalizations began to appear after empirical data was accumulated. Firstly, it was found out that such simultaneity is a characteristic of all sign languages. Grammatical categories encoded by many of these morphological structures, as well as the form they take, turned out to be very similar in different sign languages. In addition, some sign languages demonstrate constructions with sequential morphological processes. The most productive morphological tools in sign languages are reduplication, sign modification, compounding, and incorporation of numerals. Affixation is the least productive one (Valli, Lucas, 2000: 56).

It is important to distinguish Russian Sign Language from Signed Russian. The latter translates spoken Russian into signs, following the word order of spoken Russian, and is not a separate natural linguistic system. In addition to copying grammatical aspects, Signed Russian also uses artificially created gestures along with the signs of Russian Sign Language (Zaitseva, 2000). There is no grammatical gender in Russian Sign Language; however, the biological sex is encoded. Signs representing words related to males are performed in the upper part of the face, mainly in the forehead, while those related to females – in the lower part of the face. There are various ways of expressing the number: performing a one-handed sign with two hands; multiple (according to the number of referents) performance of a gesture; joining after a nominal sign such signs as MNOGO ('many') or RAZNIJ ('different'). Tense in Russian Sign Language is expressed analytically by

attaching signs BYLO ('was'), BUDET ('will'), or VCHERA ('yesterday'), ZAVTRA ('tomorrow') to the verb. Perfective aspect is also expressed analytically by adding such signs as ZAKONCHENO ('finished'), GOTOVO ('ready'). Verb signs can undergo various aspectual changes (Grenoble, 1992).

For a long time, sign languages developed in isolation, and there is all likelihood to believe that their variability was extremely high. Often the deaf had little opportunity to communicate and develop a stable version of sign language through constant communication that would be fixed as the main variant within a certain territory. A key factor in the formation of sign languages was the emergence of specialized schools, where the deaf and hard-of-hearing people got the opportunity to communicate. The existence of sign language families confirms this statement and demonstrates a strong correlation between similarity of the basic vocabulary of the languages and geography of distribution of specialized educational institutions for the deaf, which were founded by the graduates of the first schools. The history of Nicaraguan Sign Language formation is particularly representative. The existence of this sign language was not recorded until the first schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing were founded in the 70s. The students of those schools created a full-fledged natural Nicaraguan Sign Language over the course of several decades (Senghas, Coppola, 2001: 324). In addition, an important factor in the development of any sign language is the level of state support, since official recognition of sign language allows deaf and hard-of-hearing people to receive sign language services and claim an opportunity of learning in their native sign language. In Russia, sign language "is recognized as the language of communication in the presence of hearing and (or) speech impairment, including in the areas of oral use of the state language of the Russian Federation. A subtitling or sign language translation system for television programs, films and videos is being introduced. Translation of Russian Sign Language (sign language, tactile sign language translation) is carried out by interpreters of Russian Sign Language (sign language interpreter, tactile interpreter) with appropriate education and qualifications. The procedure for providing the services of translation of Russian Sign Language (sign language, tactile sign language) is determined by the Government of the Russian Federation", namely in accordance with Federal Law No. 296 "On Amendments to Articles 14 and 19 of Federal Law "On Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Russian Federation" as of December 30, 2012. Earlier, Russian Sign Language was recognized as a means of interpersonal communication.

Russian Sign Language is distributed in the Russian Federation and the CIS countries and, according to the latest census, is native to 220 thousand people. The first school for the deaf and hard-of-hearing children was opened in Pavlovsk in 1806. Over the next decades, several more similar educational institutions were founded. Due to the significant territorial remoteness and absence of an established literary norm, numerous variants of Russian Sign Language have arisen since then. The identity of the functioning and the formation of these options is determined by sociolinguistic factors. The purpose of this article is to describe the historical and sociolinguistic contexts of the development and functioning of Russian Sign

Language in Krasnoyarsk Krai. All the data for the research was obtained in archives. Methods of interviewing and questioning teachers, educators and sign teachers, as well as ethnographic and statistical methods were used.

### **Empirical evidence**

Krasnoyarsk Krai is the second largest region of the Russian Federation which is located mainly within Eastern Siberia. At present, there are three boarding schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing children in Krasnoyarsk Krai: Krasnoyarsk School No. 9, Minusinsk Boarding School and Achinsk Boarding School No. 1. The first school for children with hearing impairments was opened in Krasnoyarsk in 1922 when Krasnoyarsk Krai did not exist yet, as this territory was part of the Yenisei Province. At that time this school was headed by Prokopii Paleev who was a graduate of the Petrograd School for the Deaf-mute. He set up classes at the Krasnoyarsk Shoe Factory in 1920, where he began to teach literacy and bootmaking to deaf and hard-of-hearing children (Dobrovolskaia, 2019: 75). Minusinsk Boarding School was founded in 1932 by Anastasia N. Schegoleva, who was the mother of three deaf children. In the same year, Achinsk School was founded. According to the tradition of those times, there were small farms in the territories of schools and training included not only the formation of speaking and speech understanding skills but also the development of practical skills, for example, bootmaking. For many years the oral method of teaching involving the rejection of sign language dominated. Based on the information received from teachers of boarding schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing children, the situation changed only in the 2000s. The 90s became a transitional period. At that time, the use of signs during training was neither encouraged, nor prohibited. Currently, almost 100% of teachers speak sign language to one degree or another and use it as an intermediary language in situations when it is necessary to explain a specialized term or concept that students know little about.

Nowadays, the number of students in boarding schools is 320 people, and approximately 20% of them are students with cochlear implants. All classes in boarding schools are equipped with electro-acoustic hardware for collective and individual use. Individual, musical and rhythmic lessons, lessons in special acoustic classrooms are provided in addition to general disciplines. On average, there are six students in each class. Currently, specialized training is undergoing a transitional period and is being transformed due to the adoption of new Federal Law "On Education", which involves the introduction of inclusive education. Parents of children with hearing impairments have an opportunity to choose whether to send the child to an inclusive school or to a specialized one. In the Krasnoyarsk Territory, article 12 of Law No. 6-2519 "On Education in the Krasnoyarsk Territory" as of June 26, 2014, as amended on October 31, 2019, determines the organization of education for students with disabilities as follows:

1. Organizations are carrying out educational activities in Krasnoyarsk Krai according to the adapted basic general education programs for the deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind, visually impaired, with severe speech impairment, with disorders of the musculoskeletal system, with mental retardation, with autism spectrum

disorders, with complex defects, and students with other limited health opportunities.

2. When receiving education in the regional state and municipal educational organizations, students with disabilities are provided with free special textbooks and teaching aids, other educational literature, as well as sign language interpreters and tactile language interpreters.

3. In Krasnoyarsk Krai conditions are being created for people with disabilities to receive a generally accessible and free pre-school, primary general, basic general, secondary general education and secondary vocational education. The necessary conditions are created for people with disabilities to receive education in organizations engaged in educational activities for the implementation of basic educational programs, as well as in individual organizations engaged in educational activities based on adapted basic educational programs. Providing that it is impossible to train children with disabilities in basic general education programs in organizations engaged in educational activities, this training can be organized at home or in medical organizations, with the consent of parents (legal representatives) received.

However, almost all children with hearing impairment who were sent to a comprehensive school returned to specialized schools within six months. This tendency can be explained by the fact that it is not possible to provide a sign language interpreter for each child, and their successful integration depends on the socio-psychological status and development of speech, literacy and the degree of deafness.

Deaf literacy is closely related to the level of proficiency in Russian Sign Language. An undoubted priority of specialized boarding schools in Krasnoyarsk Krai is to prepare children for the full integration into society. At the same time sign language is the native one for the majority of students and they learn spoken Russian as a foreign language. There are frequent cases when parents of deaf and hard-of-hearing children do not speak sign language and have to turn to the teacher as an interpreter. Children living in boarding schools do not want to leave for the holidays, feeling isolated from the usual communicative environment when they are at home. Some parents have expressed concern that their children use sign language and try to limit it, which is especially true for children with coughing implants. The quality of education for the deaf depends on the level of sign language proficiency, and it should be noted that sign language is mentioned neither in state educational standards nor in laws on education.

Preschool education begins at the age of three and is aimed at the development of auditory perception and pronunciation training, as well as the development of speech. Articulation, finger, breathing exercises, training in phonetic rhythm, playing techniques in the production and automation of sounds are applied. All children learn fingerspelling, a peculiar form of communication where each letter is transmitted by certain positions of the fingers of one (one-handed dactylology) or both hands (two-handed dactylology). Through these movements of hands following each other in a specific order any word can be composed. The principle of visualization is used in teaching. Currently, the

bilingual approach in teaching deaf children of Krasnoyarsk Krai is recognized as the most effective in the formation of children's personality. On the other hand, sign language is given a secondary role, since signs are used only if the child does not understand the oral or oral-tactile message. There is a significant imbalance in sign language proficiency, since children from deaf families at the time of admission to kindergarten already know some sign language, while children from hearing families use natural pantomimic movements when communicating. Children with cochlear implants are most often taught in a separate group, and in this case sign language is not used, or have extra individual lessons. The recognition of sign language importance is proved by the existence of groups engaged in sign singing in all three boarding schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. Schoolchildren translate song lyrics into sign language, conveying the emotional component through the plasticity of their hands, facial expressions and position of the body.

It is a well-known fact that the lexical component of sign language is very variable because children in the process of communication tend to come up with new signs. Even within the same city, sign language variants may depend on the age of the participants in the speech act. There was a case when an elderly woman with hearing impairment who speaks sign language came to the Boarding School in Minusinsk, but the students understood her with difficulty. What is more, the so-called 'home signs', which are used in families with hereditary deafness, also affect the sign language variability. The existence of these variants is also confirmed by interpreters of Russian Sign Language of the Krasnoyarsk Technical School of Social Technologies since deaf and hearing-impaired people from the Krasnoyarsk Territory, the Republic of Tyva, the Republic of Khakassia, Buriatia and Novosibirsk study there (Gubich, Kirillova, 2017: 80).

Within Krasnoyarsk Krai, the regional branch of the Russian Deaf Community coordinates the activities of eight local branches, those located in Achinsk, Nazarovo, Kansk, Krasnoyarsk, Norilsk, Lesosibirsk, Minusinsk, Uzhur, and Uiar. The regional branch interacts with state and public organizations of the Krasnoyarsk Territory. In addition, regional offices provide sign language interpreters and organize cultural and other rehabilitation activities. Since 2013, the dispatch service has been operating on the basis of the Krasnoyarsk regional branch of the Russian Deaf Community. Sign language interpreters regularly receive many messages from deaf people via Skype. These messages are mainly related to the transfer of information to various government agencies.

### **Conclusion**

Russian Sign Language plays an important role in the life of the deaf and hard-of-hearing, being the mother tongue of thousands of people. For a long time, Russian Sign Language had an unofficial status. It was not recognized as a full-fledged means of communication and its importance in the formation of mental skills and identity of the deaf was ignored. In the Krasnoyarsk Territory there are three boarding schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children with a long history, and, regardless of the attitude of teachers and authorities to the sign language, the

language lived and developed. At present, the use of the sign language in schools is not subject to a strict ban but is also not being introduced as a compulsory component of the educational process. Often the situation is regulated individually, as some hearing parents insist that their children do not use sign language, while deaf parents sometimes do not recognize the value of speaking skills. The trend towards inclusion in education suggests that the system should take into account the characteristics and needs of each child and provide the necessary teaching aids. At the same time, the ultimate goal of teaching hearing impaired people is their successful integration into society. Such dualism raises questions about whether to use sign language in the educational process and whether this will cause children to lose their motivation to learn oral and written speech. Back to 1931, the famous Soviet scientist L.S. Vygotskii wrote: “The struggle of spoken language with sign language, despite all the good intentions of teachers, as a rule, always ends with victory for sign language. This happens not because sign language is, from a psychological point of view, a true speech of the deaf-mute, not because it is easier, as many teachers say, but because it is genuine speech in all the richness of its functional significance. In its turn, the artificially grafted oral pronunciation of words is devoid of vital wealth and is only a dead cast from live speech. We must use all the possibilities of the speech activity of a deaf-mute child, not being disrespectful to sign language and not treating it as an enemy. We should understand that different forms of speech can serve not only as competitors for each other and mutually inhibit development one another but also as steps by which a deaf-mute child goes back to mastering speech” (Vygotskii, 2003: 226).

The current state of Russian Sign Language functioning in Krasnoyarsk Krai allows us to talk about a change in the status of sign language. There is an increasing interest in issues related to its applied significance and a need to develop new theoretical approaches to its institutionalization. The authors’ further studies aims at identifying linguistic features of regional variants of the sign language of Eastern Siberia and developing a beta-version of the electronic corpus of sign languages of the second largest region of Russia.

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