Sign language research, uses and practices: A Belgian perspective

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1. Introduction

The title of this book, *Sign Language Research, Uses And Practices*, wants to reflect both the fact that the papers included relate to sign language research on structure, uses and practices, and our belief that sign linguistics cannot be separated from Deaf community practices, including practices in education and interpretation. Furthermore, in our opinion, there is a (strong) relationship between the uses and practices of sign languages on the one hand, and sign language structure and research on the other hand. We will briefly explain what we mean by presenting some information related to Flemish Sign Language (*Vlaamse Gebarentaal* or VGT) and French Belgian Sign Language (*Langue des signes de Belgique francophone* or LSFB), the sign languages used in Belgium.[1]

2. The uses and practices of sign languages in Belgium and LSFB/ VGT-structure and research

In Belgium, there have been important changes related to sign language uses and practices in the last decades. Some of these are sociolinguistic in nature, an important example being the official recognition of LSFB in 2003 and VGT in 2006 (Vermeerbergen and Van Herreweghe 2008), while some can be linked to values in general society about the education of children with a disability, including deaf children (Hardonk et al. 2011; Blume 2010). The policy of mainstreaming deaf children in regular schools results in changed "lines of transmission" (Ramsey 2009) with hearing sign language interpreters increasingly acting as sign language models (Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2004; Heyerick and Vermeerbergen 2012). Other changes are related to technological developments as diverse as the neonatal screening

for deafness, cochlear implantation for very young deaf infants and web and video communication development.

Traditionally, VGT and LSFB were transmitted from (older) child to (younger) child at a school for the deaf. Most deaf children of hearing parents started to acquire VGT or LSFB when beginning (pre)school but because these languages were not used as the language of instruction in deaf education, they were most often acquired as a playground variety. In the past, many deaf children spent more time at school than they do today, since most of the schools were residential schools, and the schools for the deaf were a crucial lynchpin for the transmission of sign languages and a cradle of Deaf culture. Today, things have changed significantly: most pupils attending schools for the deaf go home in the evenings to their hearing families who often have a limited or no proficiency in VGT or LSFB. Moreover, today most deaf and partially deaf pupils are mainstreamed in regular education. In Wallonia, there has been a trend towards mainstreaming deaf children starting from the 1970s with very active campaining in the 1980s (Haesenne, personal communication, September 2012) and in 1983, when the provision of educational interpreting or, more frequently, the provision of communication support workers started, the majority of deaf children were integrated in hearing schools (Haesenne, Huvelle and Kerres 2008). In Flanders, the shift from deaf schools to mainstreaming in hearing schools seems to be a bit more recent, but since 2006, there are more Flemish deaf (and partially deaf) pupils in mainstream education than in special education (De Raeve and Lichtert 2010). An important number of the deaf mainstreamed pupils have very limited access to a sign language and consequently poor levels of VGT or LSFB proficiency. Some of them acquire their sign language primarily through their engagement with their educational interpreter. As pointed out by Heyerick and Vermeerbergen (2012):

> "For these deaf pupils the signed language interpreters will most certainly function as a linguistic model, especially when it comes to the lexicon in certain academic domains, e.g. mathematics, history, sciences, but most probably also in relation to less subject-specific lexical items and aspects of the grammar. That is, these students are acquiring VGT from interpreters, who are non-native signers with varying levels of VGT competence, in situations where these interpreters are interpreting."

Today, 95% of the Flemish preschool population of deaf children are wearing one or two cochlear implants (De Raeve and Lichtert 2011) and it seems that especially in the case of early implanted deaf children, the use of a sign language at home is often discouraged. In Belgium, when there is an indication of a congenital hearing problem in an infant, parents are

referred to a referral centre for further testing (Matthijs et al. 2012; Drion 2006). Some – not all – of these referral centres put forward the idea that cochlear implants and sign language do not go hand in hand (Mouvet et al. this volume). The idea seems to be that implanted deaf children (in hearing families) will not need a sign language as they grow up, and so parents are advised that there is no need to offer it to them. As the use of a sign language is discouraged in the home situation and the transition to mainstream education is encouraged, an important question to be raised today is that of where deaf children of hearing parents in Belgium can acquire VGT or LSFB.

A totally different type of technological change is related to ICT and multimedia. Until recently, communication in a sign language was only possible between interlocutors who were at the same time at the same place. And this is believed to have a certain impact on the structure of sign languages, e.g. on the use of space for reference tracking and/or on gaze behavior (Pizzuto et al. 2008; Cuxac and Pizzuto 2010). Sign languages exist within and exploit the three spatial dimensions. More recently the advent of technology has made sign language communication between remote individuals possible. The increasing availability of affordable communication channels, together with readily available videoconferencing software, offers sign language users the possibility of remote communication. Belgian signers use the remote video facilities of Skype and ooVoo, among other possibilities, to communicate with each other in VGT and LSFB. They also video-record messages in their sign language to be sent to other signers who will watch the message at some later time. At the time of writing, i.e., in the summer of 2012, the CAB (the Flemish Sign Language interpreting agency), and Fevlado (the Flemish Deaf Association) are starting a 3 year experiment with sign language interpreting services provided through video remote facilities. All of this means that VGT and LSFB are being increasingly used for remote communication, almost always involving signers signing to a camera. As pointed out by Napier (2011: 176): "One of the challenges with using a 3D language via a video link is that the option to use 3D space is removed, and the language is portrayed in two dimensions. This may create challenges and result in possible miscommunications."

According to Napier, McKee and Goswell (2010) there is anecdotal evidence showing that the use of video remote facilities can impact on the sign language interpreting process in several ways, including limited options for interpreters to assess a deaf client's language needs, less opportunity for interpreters to brief or consult with either party, difficulties of getting a deaf person's attention if the interpreter is in a different location and the need to adapt the signing style to account for the two-dimensional medium. Simi-

larly, deaf American Sign Language (ASL) users adjust their use of ASL in direct deaf-to-deaf communication via videoconference to cope with the interference from video communication (Keating and Mirus 2003 in Napier 2011). From the limited number of studies available so far, it seems that there is indeed a technological impact on the production and comprehension of sign languages in remote communication. Whether this will also have an impact on the structure of sign languages remains to be seen.

As a result of a combination of various changes, both within and outside the Deaf community, deaf people in Flanders and Wallonia are now engaged in a much broader range of contexts compared to 20 years ago. This is for example related to a wider access to tertiary education for sign language users. A growing number of Belgian signers hold academic degrees; in some cases these are (partly) obtained abroad and in "Deaf-related" subjects (Master in Deaf Studies, Master in Sign Linguistics). In Flanders, the implementation of educational sign language interpreting, especially in tertiary educational settings, but also in secondary schools, results in the fact that VGT is used to interpret classes in a wide range of subjects. In Wallonia, there is a bilingual education programme in which LSFB is used as the medium of instruction for all school subjects (see further). In general, VGT and LSFB signers are more actively involved in hearing society and more often use their sign language to communicate in that society. Obvious illustrations here are deaf politicians. And because Belgian signers are engaging in a much broader range of contexts, VGT and LSFB seem to be going through an accelerated development, involving for instance an exponential growth of the lexicon or the development of a formal/informal register-difference, but more research needs to shed light on these evolutions.

It is clear that changing uses and practices related to VGT and LSFB bring with them a number of interesting and important research questions. For one, it would be very interesting to study whether and how these changes impact on the structure of the languages. If indeed the languages are changing, there may be a need for a re-evaluation of results from previous research projects.

3.   The collaboration between sign language researchers and sign language practitioners

Currently, sign linguistics in Belgium shows a dynamic collaboration between linguistic research and teaching/interpreting practices. A good example is the partnership between the Namur bilingual education programme and a team of sign language researchers at the University of Namur.

In 2000, the *École et Surdité* association was founded with the aim of setting up a pilot project for bilingual education for the deaf in Namur (de Halleux and Thoua 2009). The purpose of this bilingual education programme 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. The language of the curriculum is LSFB, i.e., all school subjects are taught through LSFB and all written support is in French. In addition to the regular school programme, deaf pupils take an LSFB course (two hours per week), taught by a deaf native signer.

It is a daily challenge for the teachers to teach LSFB and to use LSFB for the courses, since it remains an understudied language and since its use as a medium of instruction for all school subjects is unprecedented. The status of LSFB in the school is not the same as that of LSFB in wider society: within the school, LSFB is not only the language of instruction, it is also the language of communication between adults and deaf pupils, between deaf and hearing colleagues and the language taught by a deaf native signer during the sign language classes. LSFB is used in a large variety of discourse types (such as narratives, descriptive discourse, explanatory and argumentative texts), in a large variety of contexts (monologues, dialogues, group interactions) and for a large variety of subjects (playground conversation and academic subjects). Therefore, in 2004, when the first deaf children in the programme moved from preprimary to primary school, a "research-action group" was set up at the University of Namur whose aim was to support the teaching team in the programme. The group was made up of the bilingual teaching team (which comprised three people in 2004, but today the team consists of twelve teachers), external deaf LSFB users, sign language interpreters and the LSFB researchers at the University of Namur.

In the past 8 years, the teaching team has been happy to have been supported by the sign linguistics team at the University of Namur with linguistic resources and, vice versa, the researchers consider the bilingual classes as a privileged place giving rise to linguistic and applied linguistic questions and facilitating the testing of these (Meurant 2012).

Overall, as sign language researchers, we feel it is important to be aware of the many changes sign languages and their users are currently experiencing and to take into account how these changes impact on our work. The twelve papers gathered into this volume contribute to the same effort and fulfil the same interest to anchor sign language research in the close observation of (changes in) sign language uses, practices and structure.

4.   Contents of the book

The volume comes in the aftermath of an international conference on sign languages (CILS) held in Namur in November 2009. The goal of the conference was to "cross views" by bringing together researchers studying sign languages (linguists from different traditions, philosophers, educationalists, anthropologists, whether deaf or hearing) and sign language users and practitioners (deaf/hearing interpreters and deaf teachers). The conference programme included presentations related to actual research in sign linguistics, bilingualism, teaching by/for deaf people, sign language interpreting and anthropology and philosophy. The current volume reflects this variety in topics as it brings together papers on sign language uses and practices, including work in sign language interpreting, the use of spoken/sign language with deaf implanted children and early language development in children exposed to both a spoken and sign language, and reports on recent research on aspects of sign language structure. It also includes papers addressing methodological issues in sign language research.

The first two papers deal with early language development and child directed speech/signing. **Bencie Woll** reports on studies of early language development in young deaf and hearing children exposed to both a spoken language and a sign language, within the context of bilingual language acquisition. The course of early sign language acquisition in terms of vocabulary as measured by the British Sign Language (BSL) adaptation of the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory (CDI) is described in detail for deaf children of hearing parents and deaf children of deaf parents, and compared to BSL data for hearing children of deaf parents. Additionally, data on English language development in deaf children with hearing parents exposed to both BSL and English are compared to norms for English language development in hearing children of hearing parents. The results show that there are significant differences between language development in deaf and hearing children, even in contexts where they are developing as native signers with deaf parents. These differences are probably related to the contexts in which young children learn to label referents and point to a need for intervention programmes for deaf children to address the task of building the attention-switching required for deaf children to learn vocabulary. Nevertheless, the study provides important data confirming the benefits of bilingualism. Although the deaf children in hearing families lag behind native signers in vocabulary development, early diagnosis appears to provide hearing parents with the opportunity to learn and use signing with their deaf children, and development of BSL is strongly correlated with development of

English for these bilingual children. **Kimberley Mouvet, Liesbeth Matthijs, Gerrit Loots, Martine Van Puyvelde** and **Mieke Van Herreweghe** investigate how the narratives of two hearing mothers of a congenitally deaf child develop over time (from the end of the diagnostic process to the active utilization of bilateral cochlear implants) and how these influence the interaction between mother and child. They provide clear evidence that both mothers changed their behaviour towards their child after cochlear implantation: both women increased their use of monolingual Dutch in interaction with their child and one of them decreased the use of monolingual VGT. This clearly has consequences for the interaction and for the (bilingual) development of the child.

The next three papers focus on interpretation, mainly from a pragmatic point of view. **Terry Janzen** and **Barbara Shaffer** maintain that the interpreter is as much a discourse participant as those they are interpreting for. In order to best represent the interaction of the primary participants, there is more to pay attention to than just the words and phrases that speakers use, and signs and phrases that signers use. The interpreter must recognize that as they (co)construct a meaning of the speaker's text, they are building an intersubjective relationship with this person, and as they produce a target text they are once again building an intersubjective relationship with the recipient. Therefore it is very important for the interpreter to recognize the idea that the primary participants are doing the same with each other despite the fact that their discourse is mediated by an interpreter, and part of the interpreter's task is to attempt to let that relationship develop unimpeded. In order to study this the authors look at subjectivity and intersubjectivity within the domain of interpretation, in particular focussing on contextualization and stance taking by examining modality and modals, topic constructions, and perspective-taking within verb constructions. The authors conclude that language use is often evaluative or persuasive in function, and stance-taking in the interpreter's message contributes to the co-construction of meaning. Overall, awareness of these aspects of language use leads to a clearer understanding of how best to represent speakers' texts. **Jemina Napier** studies pragmatic adjustments of the sign communication within situations of remote interpreting. She presents a study that investigates the effectiveness of sign language interpreting in courts in the state of New South Wales (NSW) Australia, through the courts' in-house video conference facility, and shows that the video remote aspect of the legal proceedings has a pragmatic effect on the resources used by interpreters and deaf people in terms of clarification and accommodation. **Maartje De Meulder** and **Isabelle Heyerick** look at the emergence of Deaf interpreters and their traditional working domains,

i.e., in conventional settings or for certain consumers when a Hearing interpreter feels s/he cannot adequately do the job. However, they argue that interpreting on television could also be considered a "Deaf job", based on nine different dimensions. They illustrate this by means of a case study containing recent developments in Flanders, Belgium concerning in-vision interpreting. The analysis of the case study, based on direct observation and informal conversations, document analysis and analysis of recorded performances of interpreter applicants and motivational interviews, shows that there are some important future challenges, some of which are caused by the attitude of both Hearing and Deaf interpreters, others by lack of awareness in the Deaf community and still other issues because of the views and unawareness of broadcasters. They conclude that four challenges need to be tackled: training and professionalization, awareness about the interpreting process, sense of power and responsibility, and research.

The following three papers address issues on methodology in sign language research, with a special focus on representation and/or annotation. **Giulia Petitta, Alessio Di Renzo, Isabella Chiari** and **Paolo Rossini** focus on the issue of the representation of sign languages. For their description and analysis of Italian Sign Language, the authors have established a tradition of transcription by means of SignWriting since it provides new ways of looking at sign language structures and discourse. After having looked at inter-annotator agreement between three annotators transcribing the same fragment in Italian Sign Language, the authors claim that major descriptive advantages of SignWriting as an annotation system are linked to the representation of non-manual components of signed discourse, to the notation of variability of signs and to the possibility of discussing the theoretical problems of segmentation and identification of the units of analysis using a fairly neutral system. A further strength lies in its independence and autonomy from vocal languages. **Marie-Anne Sallandre** and **Brigitte Garcia** claim that the principle of resorting to "gloss-based notations" using "vocal" language words is fundamentally flawed. Historically speaking, making use of a procedure based on a written version of a spoken language can easily be explained by the absence of a system of transcription *per se* that is capable of graphically reconstructing the meaningful form of discourse in a sign language. However, applying gloss annotations to a corpus of French Sign Language data within the non-assimilationalist semiological model of sign language description (as initiated by Christian Cuxac) proves extremely problematical since there is a significant underestimation of important parts of sign language discourse in the description. Indeed, different types of "transfer units" (roughly corresponding to size and shape specifiers, classifier construc-

tions and constructed action) cannot be fully represented in a gloss notation. Besides their high rate of frequency, they are also frequently combined with "lexematic units", resulting in complex compositions which are very hard to transcribe. Therefore it would be very useful to have a means of notation that enables researchers to consistently record the meaning-form components of these transfer units. Although the authors have to admit that in annotating their corpora they are at a stage that is still experimental, they also conclude that promising avenues of research have already opened up. **Anna Sáfár** and **Onno Crasborn's** paper aims to develop criteria for a reliable and efficient data selection to determine manual spreading. In a first annotation pass their aim was to select instances of manual spreading and classify them as salient (likely to have morphosyntactic or discourse functions) or non-salient (purely prosodic). The proposed method was tested by annotating about one hour of signing from the *Corpus NGT*. The results indicate that while it is often challenging to identify spreadings (due to the difficulty of interpreting certain handshapes as signs), once a spreading has been identified, the judgement of whether it is salient can be reliably made based on their criteria. Two-handed signs may give rise to both salient and non-salient spreadings, but spreadings from one-handed signs are always judged as salient, due to the fact that saliency is in part defined by the presence of dominance reversal. The authors conclude tentatively that the criteria proposed for selecting cases of manual spreading that are likely to have morphosyntactic or discourse functions are both reliable and valid.

Three papers are devoted to the structure of one particular sign language or to the sociolinguistic variation within one language. **Aurélie Sinte's** research concerns the expression of time in French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB). Eventhough well-known use of time lines has generally been accepted for many sign languages, they still leave a lot of questions unresolved with respect to spontaneous LSFB data. Analyses were done on a mixed corpus of monologic narratives and conversations. The author focused on eyegaze behaviour (directed at the interlocutor or directed at the hands) in two different structures found in the corpus, i.e., the semantic repetition of a period or moment in an embraciating construction (A-B-A) and the use of buoys functioning as anchors by comparison to which new temporal points are situated. The author concludes that the anchoring of a reference point depends on where the gaze is oriented to when the hand(s) articulate(s) temporal signs or maintain(s) pointer buoys. When the point of reference is the time of utterance, the eye gaze is oriented to the addressee while the hands articulate the temporal sign. When the reference is linked to a point defined in the discourse which is not concomitant with the time of speaking, the eyegaze is briefly cut

off from the addressee and oriented towards the hands or towards the hand which is signing the new temporal information. The results clearly show that the former descriptions of the system of time lines do not provide all the elements involved in temporal marking and that more refined analyses are called for. **Gemma Barberà** and **Josep Quer** focus on the kind of predications where one of the arguments (typically the subject) is labelled as impersonal because of its low referentiality and a first characterization of such predications in Catalan Sign Language (*llengua de signes catalana*, LSC) is offered. Such cases are often referred to as arbitrary interpretations, whether they are overtly marked for it or not. This first exploration proves that impersonal reference in a sign language is a very rich domain, where the expression of (non-)specificity through spatial contrasting locations, overt and covert pronominal forms and role shift interact in order to convey arbitrary interpretations for arguments. Although some elements like role shift might look modality-specific, the overall picture that emerges according to the authors is that the resources put to work by LSC in this domain rely on the same basic ingredients that have been identified for a range of spoken languages. **Erin Wilkinson** inquires whether there is morphosyntactic variation in American Sign Language driven by sociolinguistic factors, by investigating the usage of SELF in ASL in Canada and the United States. The data for this study is drawn from 32 hours of naturalistic ASL discourse consisting of monologues (i.e., presentations and vlogs), 2-person conversations, and narratives. Findings showed that there were effects of region and genre that contributed to morphosyntactic variation in ASL with respect to the three forms of SELF. Regional variation (Canada versus the United States) was anticipated, but genre also clearly influenced the use of SELF forms, mainly due to differences of SELF production in vlogs and presentations. While both presentations and vlogs are similar in nature, there are slight differences between these two sub-types that may affect ASL discourse. Technology appears to shape how discourse space is defined in terms of the physical and perceived realm of the camera depending on whether it is a video camera or a webcam. Also, the presence and/or lack of discourse interlocutors appear to play a role in ASL discourse of presentations and vlogs respectively. This had its effect on the use of SELF-forms. Therefore the author maintains that future studies of ASL grammatical morphemes should be explored in a variety of genres and controlled by sociolinguistic variation.

This sociolinguistic approach of ASL is followed by a paper by **Ceil Lucas** on methodological issues in studying sign language variation. Given the need for filmed data and the lack of anonymity that comes with this filming, the methods for studying variation in sign languages present issues not seen in spoken language studies. These issues pertain to 1) data collection, including the characteristics of the researcher, the methods of recruiting and selecting subjects, and the role of contact people in the community, 2) defining the variables and constraints to be analyzed, 3) data reduction, including decisions about whether to gloss or transcribe the data phonetically, 4) dissemination of the findings, which includes taking into consideration the audience to which the findings will be disseminated – for example, deaf audiences vs. hearing, non-signing audiences – and the effect of the findings on the audience, and 5) giving back to the community in some meaningful way, in the form of instruction and/or materials.

Looking back on the editing process of this book we are very happy to be able to present papers by "more seasoned" researchers on the one hand and "new kids on the block" on the other, and papers with a collaboration between the two. We hope that the reader will enjoy reading their contributions as much as we have done.

Notes

1.   In a recent past, people were usually signing, talking and writing about one Belgian Sign Language with regional varieties both in the North and the South of the country. However, because of the Belgian federalization process, in the 1970s the national Deaf federation, NAVEKADOS, was divided up into Fevlado (Federatie van Vlaamse Dovenorganisaties, or the Flemish Deaf Association) and the Fédération Francophone des Sourds de Belgique (FFSB). As a result, cultural activities have been organized separately since the seventies, so that contacts between Flemish and Walloon deaf people have become less and less frequent. This separation has had an effect on the development of the sign languages in both communities. This is why today, the sign language used in the northern part of Belgium is called Flemish Sign Language and the sign language used in the southern part is called Langue des signes de Belgique francophone (LSFB) (Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2009).

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