

# **Deaf signers in Flanders and 25 years of Community Interpreting**

**Mieke Van Herreweghe,**

Universiteit Gent

**Myriam Vermeerbergen,**

Research Foundation-Flanders – Flanders / Vrije Universiteit Brussel

*Looking back on 25 years of Community Interpreting in the Deaf community in Flanders at least three issues seem to be noteworthy.*

*Linguistic research into Flemish Sign Language has clearly influenced the sign language interpreter training programmes. When the first programmes were started up in the early 1980s, interpreter students were taught Signed Dutch. The shift to Flemish Sign Language came about in the latter half of the 1990s, some years after the first results of Flemish Sign Language research were made available in the public domain.*

*A second important factor is the professionalisation of the interpreter. The internationally recognised evolution from a ‘helper philosophy’ via a ‘machine (conduit) philosophy’ to a ‘bilingual-bicultural philosophy’ has also taken place in Flanders.*

*Thirdly, we can see a certain impact of Community Interpreting on Deaf Empowerment. Since it is very hard to exactly identify this and more research would be necessary, these will only be brief and tentative statements.*

## **0. Introduction**

Throughout this paper the term used for the sign language in Flanders will be ‘Flemish Sign Language’ (‘Vlaamse Gebarentaal’ or VGT<sup>1</sup>). It is used by signers from the Flemish part of Belgium and is the language of a relatively small linguistic minority of about 6,000 Deaf people (Loots et al. 2003). VGT consists of five regional varieties that have developed in and around the different Flemish deaf schools: West-Vlaanderen (West Flanders), Oost-Vlaanderen (East Flanders), Antwerpen (Antwerp), Vlaams-Brabant (Flemish Brabant), and Limburg (Limburg) (De Weerd et al. 2003).

## **1. The effects of sign language research on Community Interpreting**

### **1.1. Before the mid-1990s**

In Flanders, as in many other countries and regions, the start of the research on visual-gestural communication in general and sign language in particular is closely linked to deaf children's education. Until about 1980 signs were hardly ever used in deaf education and sign languages even less so. At the end of the 70s, however, special educationalists (originally only a few) be-

came interested in the Total Communication philosophy<sup>2</sup> and thus also in a more structured use of signs – though not so much sign languages – in deaf education. The very first studies on gestural-visual communication in general and Flemish Sign Language in particular, are from this period and were primarily conducted by Filip Loncke, who was at the time working as a special educationalist in the deaf school that was the first to adopt the TC-policy and to start using Signed Dutch as a means of instruction. Loncke also closely collaborated with the Flemish Deaf Federation, Fevlado.

In 1979 Fevlado organized a symposium about communication and Deaf<sup>s</sup> people, and mainly due to the influence of the international recognition of sign languages, it was decided to start promoting the use of signs in Flanders as well. However, the choice made was not to promote and use VGT itself, but to promote and use a signed system called ‘Nederlands met Gebaren’ or ‘Signed Dutch’. In this system the morpho-syntax of Dutch was (and is) combined with the lexicon of VGT, so that there generally is a mapping of one-word-to-one-sign, with additional signs for 14 morphological markers, e.g. a diminutive marker, a past tense marker, etc. (Buyens 1987).

There were two main reasons why Deaf and hearing people at the time decided to promote Signed Dutch. Firstly, at that point people did not realise that the communication system used in the Deaf community was actually a language. In 1974 at a National Conference of Navekados<sup>4</sup>, its president held a closing speech in which it was stated that:

(...) Navekados is geen voorstander van onderwijs door middel van Gebarentaal. Wel wijst ze op de noodzaak dat de dove zich kan uitdrukken op de hem natuurlijke wijze, anders zou hij zijn identiteit verliezen. We moeten een Gebarentaal hebben, die de taalkundige regels eerbiedigt. Dat is het beste middel om de taalarmoede in te dijken.<sup>5</sup> (Buyens 2003: 76)

This quote clearly illustrates that, on the one hand, it was recognised that Deaf people had their own ‘natural’ form of communication, i.e. the use of signs, and that this was crucial for their own identity, but that on the other hand this natural form of communication was not considered a language since it lacked a ‘proper’ grammar. Therefore it was believed that Deaf people needed a ‘real’ language, and because of this, they opted for the combination of the grammar of Dutch and their own ‘natural’ signs. Secondly, people supposed that a communication system with a ‘unified’ lexicon and a ‘good’ (Dutch) grammar would meet with less resistance in the hearing community. Moreover, they believed that a sign language consisting of at least five varieties and a ‘primitive’, unanalyzed, and undescribed grammar would most likely be frowned upon.

The Flemish deaf state that a pure sign language is less acceptable for a highlevel variety, because they think the grammatical rules of the spoken language should be respected. It is

clear that this attitude must be understood as a compromise in a country with a strong oral tradition. In Flanders it still appears to be unacceptable to argue for a pure sign language. It seems that this is the real reason why the deaf propose a kind of Signed Dutch, presumably hoping that this will be more easily accepted among educationalists. But implicitly, the inferiority of pure sign languages seems to be assumed. (Loncke 1983: 161).

Initiatives to promote Signed Dutch included publications, Signed Dutch courses for hearing people, courses for Deaf people and – probably most importantly – the foundation of an interpreter’s training programme.

At its 1979 symposium about communication and d/Deaf people, Fevlado also decided to set up a sign interpreter training programme<sup>6</sup> in (or near) Ghent, and on 15th October 1981 the first class started. It may be interesting to note that in that year not only the sign interpreter training programme was set up, but also a Total Communication experiment implementing the use of Signed Dutch as a medium of instruction in one deaf school and many of the people involved in the one project were also involved in the other.

Within the framework of the promotion of Signed Dutch and the foundation of the interpreter training programme in Ghent, it was also decided to develop ‘unified’ signs because it was thought that the use of regional variants would cause confusion among the hearing sign interpreter students and among the hearing teachers in the deaf schools. Therefore, a sign committee was established with Deaf sign language users from the different regions. For fifteen years the committee met one Saturday a month to select a standard ‘unified’ sign for each Dutch word taken from a frequency list of about 9,200 Dutch words (Geysels et al. 1989). Some of the signs that were accepted into the ‘unified’ lexicon were originally ones used in one or more of the VGT varieties, while others were completely invented. That way all the selected or invented signs were labelled the ‘unified’ signs (Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2004). The meetings led to the 1995 publication of a Signed Dutch dictionary, which was then used in the interpreter training programme in Ghent and in those deaf schools where Signed Dutch was permitted. (Buyens 1995).

Consequently, the Signed Dutch classes exclusively focused on this unified lexicon. Lessons in grammar were considered unnecessary, since the grammar of Signed Dutch was based on the grammar of Dutch and it was thought that students already knew that. This, of course, had its effect on the teaching method as well. From the beginning onwards the choice made was to have Deaf teachers for the Signed Dutch classes. However, there were no d/Deaf people who had had any didactic or methodological training in teaching a language, hence the translation method was used: for each Dutch word the equivalent in signs was given and the students had to practice those signs until they could make entire sentences (in a Dutch word order).

As years went by, however, both teachers and students became increasingly unhappy with this method, because the classes were extremely tedious, and too much time was spent on production while hardly any attention was paid to reception. In 1992, it was therefore decided to rewrite the methodology of the lessons and to adopt a communicative method. The idea was that, since most students knew no signs upon entering the programme, in the first two years the students should learn to communicate in Signed Dutch before they could start focusing on interpreting (De Froy et al. 1992). Hence, from then on, during the first two years the stress was on communication (instead of on learning single signs that had to be used in prepared sentences) and during the last two years on interpretation<sup>7</sup>, originally only from spoken Dutch into Signed Dutch, but about two years later also from Signed Dutch into spoken Dutch.

There were still some major problems with this teaching method, though. Firstly, the teachers still had not received any didactic or methodological training, so that it was very difficult for them to have to change their previously used methods without any form of support. Moreover, these were all people who had not experienced any foreign language training themselves since at the time of their own school education Flemish Sign Language was completely disregarded, Dutch was taught from a mother tongue perspective and (other) foreign languages were hardly or not offered at all. A second problem had to do with Signed Dutch. Many graduated interpreters felt that Signed Dutch was completely useless in the field. There were too many communication problems with Deaf people: many Deaf people did not understand Signed Dutch easily or did not use it at all, while on the other hand the hearing interpreters did not know any Flemish Sign Language and did not understand or use it. Ironically, this created a communication barrier between the Deaf client and the hearing interpreter. The problem, though, was that many Deaf people in Flanders still tended to value Signed Dutch higher than Flemish Sign Language, so that there was no pressure from the Deaf community to change to Flemish Sign Language classes in the interpreter training course (odd as it may seem, since there were so many communication problems). A third problem concerns the choice of the signs themselves. Graduated interpreters did not know the signs that were used in their own regions, but only knew the 'new' signs (as the 'unified' signs were named by Deaf people), whereas on the other hand many Deaf people did not know these 'new' signs and only knew the 'old' signs from their own region. It was only in the second half of the 1990s that attempts were made to solve these problems.

Although 1981 is the official start of sign interpreter training in Flanders, there already existed an unofficial training programme for interpreters<sup>8</sup>. In 1979 NEDO<sup>9</sup>, an umbrella organisation at the time wanting to be an alternative for Fevlado, started offering courses in what they believed to be the 'authentic sign language' used by Flemish signers with the aim of training future interpreters. The people in charge of NEDO did not believe in the necessity to develop and promote the Signed Dutch lexicon and they objected to the (use of) unified signs. Instead, they chose to teach the 'real Deaf signs', which in reality meant the use of the signs from the region of

Mechelen, a town in the province of Antwerp, where the training programme was – and still is – organised. The founders of this programme, however, did not fully realise that ‘authentic signing’ does not only consist of ‘authentic signs’ but also of a specific grammar. The general belief was that signers combined their signs with a simplified grammar of Dutch. Because of this, and of course also because of the lack of information on the grammar of Flemish Sign Language, the language classes mostly concentrated on teaching the signs but as mentioned above, a good many of the signs were different from the signs taught in Ghent. The method used was the translation method in which short texts in written Dutch were ‘translated’ into a form of sign-supported Dutch. For a sentence such as ‘The neighbours buy a new house’, for example, students would learn the signs for ‘neighbour’, ‘buy’, ‘new’ and ‘house’. They would be told that Deaf people do not use signs for ‘the’ and ‘a’ and possibly also that Deaf signers may sign HOUSE NEW instead of NEW HOUSE, resulting in a sentence like NEIGHBOUR BUY NEW HOUSE or NEIGHBOUR BUY HOUSE NEW. From this we can see that a very limited number of aspects of VGT-grammar were explained. However, they were not regarded and taught as elements of VGT-grammar but rather as how Deaf people’s signing differs from Dutch grammar. Theoretically this was different from the Ghent programme where students were taught to use signs for each of these Dutch words, including ‘the’, ‘a’, and even certain morphological markers in Dutch. Nevertheless, the result looked quite similar, because it is usually impossible to produce signs and words at the same time (the production of a sign takes approximately twice the time of the articulation of a word). Therefore, even though students in Ghent were taught to sign THE NEIGHBOUR-S BUY A NEW HOUSE, the ultimate production (especially in connected discourse) would very often be something like NEIGHBOUR BUY NEW HOUSE, a sentence very similar to the one in Mechelen.

## **1.2. After the mid-1990s**

### **1.2.1. Morpho-syntactic research**

Since 1990, i.e. the onset of linguistic research into the grammar of Flemish Sign Language, efforts have been made to make the results of this research as accessible as possible to everyone. Especially for people who wanted to teach and learn VGT, there was a great need for more information about VGT, particularly its grammar. In the second half of the 1990s two grammar books were published, i.e. Van Herreweghe (1995) and Vermeerbergen (1997). Some time after the publication of both grammar books it was realised that most people within the Deaf community – including the Deaf teachers in the interpreter training programmes – remained unaware of even the mere fact that research had been and was being carried out. The fact that the information was published in Dutch appeared to be the main obstacle. It was therefore decided to produce a ‘signing book’, i.e. a video in which the

results of the linguistic research on Flemish Sign Language were presented using Flemish Sign Language as the medium of communication (Vermeerbergen 1999).

By the mid-1990s both Flemish interpreter training programmes started to pay some attention to the grammar of VGT in their programmes. Somewhat simplifying the matter, one could say that as a first step the available information was explained without further ado. A good example is that in 1991-1992, during the third-year Signed Dutch proficiency lessons in the Ghent programme, a new book on Sign Language of the Netherlands (Schermer et al. 1991), which had just appeared, was read in class and ‘deciphered’ by the students and teacher together. However, in that same year the first-year students in the new programme were already taught ‘sign language grammar’ for 50 hours a year (cf. Van Herreweghe & Van Nuffel 2000). This was a strictly theoretical course and it took some years before the grammatical information was translated into practical exercises. In the Mechelen programme there was, for the first time, a specific ‘sign language grammar’ course in 1993-1994, a 10-hour course for first-year students, taught by one of the VGT-researchers. In the previous years, only a brief introduction to the grammar of sign languages had been presented during one or more guest lectures. It is not very clear how and to what degree this theoretical information was included in the language classes, but from accounts by former students it seems that this was only minimal.

In the (few) grammar classes quite a lot of attention was paid to a (small) number of structures and mechanisms that were seen as ‘typical’ of VGT (or sign languages in general). One example is ‘localisation’ i.e. the mechanism by which a referent (a person, object,...) is attributed a ‘locus’ i.e. an area in signing space. This locus can be seen as (grammatically) representing the referent and as such real pointing to the locus needs to be interpreted as pointing to the associated referent. However, in VGT usage by native and near-native signers, not all referents are always being associated with a locus, but since localising was seen as typical of sign language usage, interpreter students were overusing it. Another example is the ‘question sign construction’: a sentence structure involving what looks like a rhetorical question e.g.

? \_\_\_\_\_  
 MOTHER BUY SHOES WHERE// AFRICA  
 ‘My mother bought these shoes in Africa’ or:  
 ‘It was in Africa that my mother bought these shoes’

Such a construction consists of a first part ending in a question sign and a second part that contains the answer to the question. It is typically used if one wants to focus on the second part of the structure. Again, this construction does not occur in the language usage of Flemish signers with a high frequency but it was – and is – used abundantly by interpreter students.

Gradually the grammar classes in the interpreter training programmes were based on the research results summarized in the grammar

books that appeared around 1995-1997. Due to the state of the art of VGT-research at that time, these books are of course only partial descriptions of the grammar of VGT. Many linguistic mechanisms, structures, etc. remain un(der)studied, un(der)described and hence excluded from the classes. Moreover, those aspects of VGT-grammar which do not clearly correspond to mechanisms in spoken language research, e.g. visual imagery, integration of what at first sight looks like 'gesture', specific instances of simultaneity, etc. were more or less ignored. As an important consequence, (many) qualified interpreters were only using part of the VGT-grammar. In most cases, this did not prohibit VGT-signers from understanding the interpreter, because after all what they saw was (part of) VGT-grammar. However, very frequently the interpreter did not understand 'genuine VGT-signing' and signers needed to adapt their language in order to be fully understood by the interpreter.

Fortunately, the interpreter training programmes soon became aware of these problems and tried to find ways to alter the situation. This was done in a number of ways. In Mechelen, for instance, Deaf (near-)native signers were involved as (voluntary) teaching assistants, students were required to work with recordings of 'real' fully-fledged VGT-signing, and students were stimulated (or even required) to have a lot of informal contacts with VGT-signers. Although these most certainly were laudable attempts and the quality of the training and of the trained interpreters' work keeps on improving, the lack of more information on VGT-grammar is hampering this development.

In the Ghent programme it was strongly felt that there was an urgent need of *trained* Deaf teachers. However, since there is no teacher training programme focussing on VGT in Flanders, it was impossible to look for Deaf teachers with an appropriate degree. Therefore a system of on-the-job training was developed in which, for the proficiency classes, a hearing teacher with a pedagogical degree (and at the same time a good signer) collaborated with one of the Deaf teachers so that each class was prepared and taught by both of them together. This entailed investment of a lot of energy on the part of the teachers and a lot of money on the part of the programme organisers, but it has proven extremely valuable.

### **1.2.2. Lexical research**

From October 1999 until October 2001, a preliminary and explorative study of the lexicon of Flemish Sign Language was conducted at Ghent University, in cooperation with the Centre for Linguistics (CLIN) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. One of its important goals was to collect currently used VGT-signs so as to be able to get an insight into the degree of regional variation in this language. Before this study was conducted, it was assumed that VGT consisted of five regional varieties which have developed in and around the different Flemish deaf schools. The lexical study confirmed the existence of these five regional varieties and showed that there is not only

inter-regional but also intra-regional variation. There are different causes for the relatively high degree of intraregional variation (e.g. gender, age, register, etc.), but these cannot be discussed here (see De Weerd & Vanhecke 2004). Although the differences between the regions are substantial, the fact remains that there is more lexical similarity than that there are differences. Moreover, from this lexicographical research it has become clear that Flemish Sign Language is currently undergoing an unplanned standardization process. Indeed, given the ever-increasing contacts between Deaf people from different regions, these variants will continue to spread and be adopted in other regions. Thus, Flemish Sign Language seems to be spontaneously growing into a standard sign language. Another major goal of the project was to initiate the development of the very first bilingual dictionary (VGT/Dutch – Dutch/VGT). The main principle of this sign dictionary is to provide its users with the current VGT lexicon, including its regional variants. It is freely accessible at <http://gebaren.UGent.be>.

Nevertheless, the abundant regional lexical variation is still a problem for a centralised interpreter training programme. The Mechelen programme has never changed its decision to concentrate on signs used in their own area, but in the Ghent programme (with students from all over Flanders) this was a more serious problem which was dealt with by making a distinction between students' productive and receptive lexicons. In the first year, for instance, the sign language proficiency classes are taught by a Deaf signer from West Flanders (in collaboration with a hearing teacher), so that students are expected to know West Flemish signs both productively and receptively. At the same time they also have to be able to understand (but not use) signs from other dialect areas. In the second year the Deaf teacher is from East Flanders, etc. It is hoped that through this approach the students will be able to cope better with the existing lexical variation (which seems to be overwhelming new students), and indeed the results seem to be positive. Obviously the on-line electronic dictionary, which contains many regional variants, has been and is essential in this type of approach.

### **1.3. Current and future issues**

Presumably because sign linguists no longer feel the need to prove that sign languages are indeed real languages, the unique characteristics of gestural-visual languages are becoming more and more the focus of attention, instead of the underlying identity of spoken and signed languages. It is also no longer taken for granted that spoken language research instruments (theories, categories, notions, etc.) automatically 'fit' sign language research (Vermeerbergen 2006). This change has already led to a revision of some earlier interpretations (cf. Liddell 2003 for an alternative interpretation of the use of space in verb agreement and can be illustrated by means of the analysis of so called 'classifier constructions'. Early descriptions suggested that component parts of classifier constructions were discrete, listable and



specified in the grammar of individual sign languages, each having morphemic status (e.g. Supalla 1982), i.e. they were typical of sign languages, but described by means of spoken language tools like ‘classifier’, ‘morpheme’, ‘(verb)stem’, etc. More recent interpretations question the usefulness of such notions (see several papers in Emmorey 2003). Yet other researchers (e.g. Schembri et al. 2005) consider the possibility of dealing with mixed forms, i.e. structures involving both linguistic and non-linguistic components, which is closer to the view of Cogill-Koez (2000) who argues that a ‘classifier construction’ should be seen as a visual representation of an action, event, or spatial relationship. How to deal with ‘visual imagery’ is but one of the many ‘(more) sign language specific’ issues in recent sign language research. It is clear that work on these issues is work in progress and that many questions remain.

These developments in sign language research provide specific challenges for the people engaged in the teaching of sign languages and sign language interpretation. Sign linguists are increasingly moving in the direction of a ‘sign language specific approach’, whereas the application of their findings tends to fall behind. Consequently, there is a generation of teachers and interpreters who still view sign languages from a spoken language perspective. Bridging this gap is not obvious. In some European interpreter training programmes those responsible for teaching the grammar of the language are also involved in linguistic research. And we know of cases where such researchers/lecturers encourage their students to think and talk about ‘unsolved issues’ in sign language research. Some students regard this as interesting, even fascinating. But there most certainly are also students who consider this lack of clear answers and information most upsetting and discouraging.

## **2. A gradual professionalisation of the interpreter**

Before the 1980s, Flanders was still in the phase in which people adopted a pathological view towards deafness embracing, in Humphrey & Alcorn’s words, a “helper philosophy”:

(...) the interpreter who subscribes to the helper philosophy tends to be overly involved with the clients s/he encounters. This interpreter may move out of the role of interpreting to advise, direct, teach, or cajole deaf and non-deaf clients. The attitude behind this behaviour is often the belief that d/Deaf people are incapable of fully understanding or participating in the world around them, due to their limited experiential base. Thus, the need for an interloper. (Humphrey & Alcorn 1996<sup>2</sup>:163)

Interpreters were mostly family or clergy and professionals working with d/Deaf people who did not regard interpreting as a profession and most of the

time interpreted (or rather ‘helped’ in the communication process) voluntarily (without getting any remuneration). Hence when the official interpreter training programme was set up in 1981, most of the students were either CODAs<sup>10</sup> or people working in a deaf school (nearly exclusively the one school implementing the Total Communication programme) and/or a service for d/Deaf adults. They already had good to very good signing skills and this remained the same in the first years. Those people already had jobs and were not interested in becoming full-time interpreters but thought it a good idea to get recognition for something they had already done voluntarily so many times. The only place in which some of them had actually been working as professional interpreters was in court (as sworn interpreters<sup>11</sup>). Nearly as soon as the first interpreters graduated from the programme, i.e. in 1983, a professional organisation of sign (language) interpreters was established, viz. the ‘Beroepsvereniging voor Doventolken’ or BVDT (i.e. the Professional Organisation for Interpreters for the Deaf), which seems to be indexical of a mostly pathological view since the focus was on interpreters interpreting for (or rather helping?) d/Deaf people in their communication in and with hearing society, but not vice versa. The professional organisation went through a complete transformation in 1992, when the whole board resigned, and a new organisation was established, i.e. the Vlaamse Vereniging van Tolken Gebarentaal<sup>12</sup> (the Flemish Association of Sign Language Interpreters). The name is emblematic of a changed attitude towards Signed Dutch and Flemish Sign Language.

In November 1991, the Flemish government supplied funds for a central interpreting agency (the CAB or ‘Communicatie Assistentie Bureau’) to be set up in Flanders and today in 2006 it is still subsidized by the Flemish government. Furthermore, since 1994 Flemish d/Deaf people have been entitled to interpreter services for a fixed number of hours per year. Up till then d/Deaf people had to pay for interpreter services themselves, or had to rely on the goodwill of somebody else (e.g. their employer) to pay for an interpreter. Needless to say that many d/Deaf people decided that they could manage without. In July 1994 a bill was passed to grant d/Deaf people a number of “free interpreting hours”, i.e. the government would pay for an interpreter with a maximum per d/Deaf person of 18 hours a year for personal matters and of 10% of the total number of working hours of the d/Deaf person. Travelling expenses had to (and still have to) be paid for by the user. Consequently, since more and more interpretation was provided for, the interpreter’s professionalisation picture developed gradually. Even though some of the ‘older’ interpreters still operated within the framework of the first stage, by 1994 Flanders had generally arrived in a second professionalisation phase, in which interpreters mostly worked free-lance and are sometimes regarded as ‘devices’ or ‘machines’ that need to function and perform when required. Humphrey & Alcorn labelled this the “machine (conduit) philosophy”:

When looking at the work of an interpreter functioning from this philosophical frame, you would also see a “*verbatim*”

transmission of words/signs. Interpreters focused on volume, being sure to sign every word spoken and to speak every sign produced. Unfortunately, monolingual consumers often saw a torrent of signs or heard a great number of words – from which it was often difficult to derive meaning. Interpreters took on almost a robot-like role in the communication process, assuming *no* responsibility for the interaction or communication dynamics taking place between clients. (Humphrey & Alcorn 1996<sup>2</sup>:165)

This can be linked to an upgrading of the first interpreter training programmes in the early 1990s from the level of secondary education to the level of post-secondary education. These students were for the most part people with hardly any knowledge of Deafness and zero signing skills as they entered the programme and their aim now was to become a professional interpreter. Interpreters and interpreter students seemed to be very wary of omitting information and thus the volume of signs (but less so of words, since sign-to-voice interpretation is for most people extremely difficult) was considered of primary importance. At the same time a lot of attention was paid to physical, more machine-like, aspects of the interpretation process: Where do interpreters have to stand in different types of settings (e.g. in medical, religious, legal, theatre, etc. settings)? How can visibility be as optimal as possible (i.e. by means of dark-coloured clothing, by avoiding back-lighting, etc.)? A newly formulated Code of Ethics also received a lot of attention. Unfortunately the linguistic aspects of the interpretation process did not receive the same amount of consideration.

From the mid 1990s onwards, a clear evolution from a ‘machine (conduit) philosophy’ towards a ‘bilingual-bicultural philosophy’ can be discerned:

This philosophy of interpreting reflected an effort to hit the mid-point between the two extremes of helper and machine. In the bilingual-bicultural philosophy, the interpreter continues to be sensitive to physical communication dynamics, indicating who is speaking, placing her/himself appropriately, etc. S/he is also keenly aware of the inherent differences in the languages, cultures, norms for social interaction and schema of the parties using interpreting services. Thus, interpretation is defined more broadly to include cultural and linguistic mediation while accomplishing speaker goals and maintaining dynamic equivalence – a whole new concept! (Humphrey & Alcorn 1996<sup>2</sup>:169-170)

It is clear, though, that the various interactants have not developed towards this last philosophy to the same degree. There seems to be a significant disparity between society in general, which expects sign language interpreters to be helpers, the Deaf community where some people still operate in the

second and some in the third phase, sign language interpreters themselves (again with some people in the second phase and some in the third), and the researchers who advocate the bilingual-bicultural philosophy.

### **3. The Deaf community and Community Interpreting**

At least until the beginning of the 1990s, Flemish Sign Language nearly exclusively lived ‘underground’ in the Flemish Deaf community and did not play a role in mainstream (hearing) society. But the choice of promoting Signed Dutch instead of Flemish Sign Language illustrates that even within the Deaf community there were many doubts regarding the linguistic status of Flemish Sign Language. Another consequence of the low status of sign language within the Deaf community itself becomes clear when looking at who were ‘the people in charge’, i.e. the Deaf leaders in the Deaf community: Fevlado’s key positions were taken either by hearing signers (CO-DAs) or by deaf people with good oral skills. This was because it was felt that in order to be in charge you needed to know a ‘real’, fully-fledged language, but it also showed the tendency to believe that those with better knowledge of Dutch were also the ‘more intelligent’ people.

In 1993, Fevlado set up a project one of the objectives of which was to give Deaf teachers a basic methodological training in sign (language) teaching. The ‘teacher trainees’ were a group of approximately 16 people who had already taught sign classes in the Ghent interpreter training programme for many years and people who had been teaching sign classes outside this interpreter training programme to hearing adults. The first part of the training (40 hours) was conducted in Flanders and was spread over five 8-hour days of training. The second part (also 40 hours) was taken care of by the Bristol Centre for Deaf Studies and was spread over a week during the 1994 Easter holidays. First, two teacher training days in Flanders were organised which encompassed teaching basic sign linguistics to the teacher trainees so that they would at least get some insight into the way Flemish Sign Language is structured. For most of the participants it was the first time that they learnt anything at all about VGT. Most of them had been educated at deaf schools in which VGT was considered inferior (and certainly not a language), and some had been mainstreamed (without the support of a sign language interpreter) and were not aware of the linguistic status of VGT. After the first two days in Flanders, the whole group went to Bristol and was taught the module ‘Teaching Methods 1’ by a British Deaf teacher through a form of International Sign<sup>13</sup>.

After returning from Bristol, three more days followed in Flanders in which the teacher trainees had to prepare Flemish Sign Language – not Signed Dutch – classes (at different levels, from beginning to advanced) on a number of topics, teach the prepared lessons and evaluate them. The project proved to be an eye-opener for many of the teacher trainees, some of whom began to have serious doubts about the use of Signed Dutch in an interpreter training programme and it all resulted in different ways of thinking about Flemish Sign

Language and Signed Dutch by the Deaf trainees. This ‘empowerment’ had a fairly big impact on the Deaf community: When some people in the ‘Bristol group’ started up a debate in the Flemish Deaf community about Flemish Sign Language versus Signed Dutch, they met with a lot of antagonism, especially by the ‘older’ leaders who had always supported Signed Dutch, but the debate ultimately resulted in the empowered group taking over as leaders of the Flemish Deaf community (and of Fevlado).

Gradually, with their growing awareness of VGT as a fully-fledged language and international movements away from signed systems, more and more signers began to believe it would be better to promote the use of Flemish Sign Language instead of Signed Dutch, in deaf education, in sign (language) courses for hearing adults and in interpreter training programmes as well. As a result, Fevlado officially rejected the use of Signed Dutch – and its ‘unified’ signs – in 1997, and from 1998 onwards changed the courses they offered, from Signed Dutch to classes in Flemish Sign Language.

The above sketched process towards a professionalisation of the sign language interpreter can be linked to a growing Deaf Awareness in Flanders, although there still is a long way to go. Since Deaf people in Flanders were given certain means to make use of interpreters in 1994, after having visited the Centre for Deaf Studies at Bristol (but also Gallaudet University in Washington DC) and after the first publications on Flemish Sign Language, Deaf people started to be empowered very rapidly: in the late 1990s Deaf signers took over as leaders of the national Deaf federation; since then there have been more Deaf signing students in (higher) education; in 2004 a Deaf signer was elected Member of the Flemish Parliament; on 26th April 2006 Flemish Sign Language was officially recognised by Flemish Parliament<sup>14</sup>, etc. These and others are clear tokens of a surging Deaf empowerment and although it is very hard to objectively prove a causal relationship with Community Interpreting, we are convinced it has had a certain degree of impact as none of this would have been possible without interpreters<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a gap between the Deaf leaders in the Deaf community and the not so active Deaf members of the Deaf community. The former have been on the (hearing, mainstream) barricades for some time now to defend their language and to obtain recognition, whereas the latter are not always convinced of the linguistic status of Flemish Sign Language. Many are still reluctant to even call it a ‘language’ (Van Herreweghe & Verhelst 2004). It seems that so much effort has been put into convincing hearing, mainstream society of the linguistic status of VGT, that new ways need to be looked for to disseminate that same type of information into the Deaf community. In this respect it is also striking that today the more active propagators of ‘Deaf identity’ among young Deaf people have either been raised (strictly) orally, and/or have a form of acquired deafness. It seems that access to information (mainly in Dutch), and to mainstream education (by means of sign language interpreters) is the catalytic agent. The future will tell whether this will become a more general tendency.

#### 4. And finally ...

Up until now there has been very little research on sign language interpretation in Flanders. Some interpreter students have done some fieldwork in the course of their final dissertation requirement, but these are mainly limited to physical circumstances like lighting, visual noise, repetitive strain injury (RSI), etc. Van Herreweghe (2002) looked into turn-taking mechanisms in interpreted multi-party meetings but the results and suggestions have not yet been taken up in the interpreter training programmes in Flanders.

Nevertheless, we believe that research into the following issues could yield interesting results:

- Differences in language usage of VGT-users compared to interpreters, e.g. which morpho-syntactic structures, discourse features, etc. are frequently used by the former and not by the latter, or vice versa.
- Differences in the type of information which can be expressed in a visual language as opposed to an oral language and how to deal with this as interpreters. It is, for instance, possible in VGT (and in other sign languages) to provide detailed information with regard to the (locative) relation between two referents, something which is difficult to interpret into a spoken language like Dutch. Sometimes this type of detailed information is superfluous but sometimes it is absolutely necessary.
- Differences in interpreting for adults as opposed to children:
  - Research into the possible impact of interpreters on the language usage of Deaf children (and possibly also adults) (cf. Vermeerbergen & Van Herreweghe 2004).
  - Research into the reception and understanding of interpreted interactions in education by Deaf pupils and students: we have informally experienced that students tend to state that they can understand class interactions perfectly because of the interpreter but that in reality this is not always the case.

Hopefully, in the next 25 years it will become possible to provide some answers to these challenging issues.

#### Bibliography

- Buyens, M. (1987). *Nederlands met gebaren : taalkundige, sociale en opvoedkundige aspecten*. Gent: Federatie van Vlaamse Dovenverenigingen.
- Buyens, M. (ed.) (1995). *Gebarenwoordenboek*. Leuven/Apeldoorn: Garant.
- Buyens, M. (ed.) (2003). *Gebarentaaltolken: een Brug tussen Doven en Horenden. 20 jaar Tolkschool in Gent*. Leuven: Garant.
- Cogill-Koez, D. (2000). Signed language classifier predicates: linguistic structures or schematic visual representation? *Sign Language and Linguistics* 3(2), 153-207.
- De Froy, S., C. De Smedt, M. Van Herreweghe & M. Van Nuffel (1992). *Praktische lesuitwerking voor de graduaatsopleiding van doventolken*. Gent: Unpublished BA dissertation.

- De Weerdt, K., E. Vanhecke, M. Van Herreweghe, M. Vermeerbergen (2003). *Op (onder)zoek naar de Vlaamse gebaren-schat*. Gent: Cultuur voor Doven.
- De Weerdt, K., M. Van Herreweghe, K. Van Mulders & M. Vermeerbergen (2004). *Woordenboek Nederlands-Vlaamse Gebarentaal/Vlaamse Gebarentaal-Nederlands*. On line at: <http://gebaren.ugent.be>.
- Emmorey, K. (ed.) (2003). *Perspectives on Classifier Constructions in Sign Languages*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Geysels, G., C. Ostyn, I. Snoeys & K. Vlaeminck (1989). *Basiswoordenschatlijst. Bron voor verdere ontwikkelingen binnen de tolkenopleiding*. Gentbrugge: unpublished BA dissertation.
- Humphries, J.H. & B.J. Alcorn (1996). *So you want to be an interpreter? An introduction to sign language interpreting*. Amarillo, Texas: H&H Publishers.
- Loncke, F. (1989). *Geschiedenis van gebarentalen en gebarensystemen*. Coursebook used in the Signed Dutch interpreter training programme organised by Instituut Glorieux, Oostakker and Fevlado, Gentbrugge.
- Loncke, F. (1983). "The specific situation of the Flemish deaf people and their attitudes towards sign language". J. Kyle & B. Woll. *Language in sign*. London: Croom Helm, 159-162.
- Loots, G., I. Devisé, G. Lichtert, N. Hoebrechts, C. Van De Ginste & I. De Bruyne. (2003). *De gemeenschap van doven en slechthorenden in Vlaanderen. Communicatie, taal en verwachtingen omtrent maatschappelijke toegankelijkheid*. Gent: Cultuur voor Doven.
- Schembri, A., C. Jones & D. Burnham (2005). "Comparing Action Gestures and Classifier Verbs of Motion: Evidence from Australian Sign Language, Taiwan Sign Language, and Non-Signers' Gestures Without Speech". *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 10(3), 272-290.
- Schermer, T., C. Fortgens, R. Harder & E. de Nobel (1991). *De Nederlandse Gebarentaal*. Amsterdam: Nederlandse Stichting voor het Dove en Slechthorende Kind / Twello: Van Tricht Uitgeverij.
- Supalla, T. (1982). *Structure and Acquisition of Verbs of Motion and Location in American Sign Language*. PhD dissertation, University of California.
- Vanhecke, E. & K. De Weerdt (2004). "Regional Variation in Flemish Sign Language". M. Van Herreweghe & M. Vermeerbergen (eds). *To the Lexicon and Beyond: Sociolinguistics in European Deaf Communities*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 27-38.
- Van Herreweghe, M. (1995). "Sign Interpreting in Flanders". *European Forum for Sign Language Interpreters: Newsletter*, 10(1), 6 - 11.
- Van Herreweghe, M. (1995). *De Vlaams-Belgische Gebarentaal: Een eerste verkenning*. Gent: Academia Press.
- Van Herreweghe, M. (2002). "Turn-taking mechanisms and active participation in meetings with Deaf and hearing participants in Flanders". C. Lucas (ed.), *Turn-taking, Fingerspelling, and Contact in Signed Languages, Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities, vol. 8*, Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 73 - 103.
- Van Herreweghe, M. & M. Van Nuffel (2000). "Sign (Language) Interpreting in Flanders". *Journal of Interpretation*, 101-127.
- Van Herreweghe, M. & F. Verhelst (2004). *An Ethnographic Research into the West Flemish Deaf Community*. Poster presented at the "Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research 8"-Conference, Barcelona.
- Van Herreweghe, M. & M. Vermeerbergen (2004). "Flemish Sign Language: Some Risks of Codification". M. Van Herreweghe & M. Vermeerbergen (eds). *To the Lexicon and Beyond: Sociolinguistics in European Deaf Communities*. Washington D.C: Gallaudet University Press, 111-137.
- Vermeerbergen, M. (1996). *ROOD KOOL TIEN PERSOON IN. Morfo-syntactische Aspecten van Gebarentaal*. PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.
- Vermeerbergen, M. (1997). *Grammaticale Aspecten van de Vlaams-Belgische Gebarentaal*. Gentbrugge: Cultuur voor Doven.
- Vermeerbergen, M. (1999). *Grammaticale Aspecten van de Vlaams-Belgische Gebarentaal-videoboek*. Affligem: Vlaams Gebarentaalcentrum.
- Vermeerbergen, M. (2006) "Past and Current Trends in Sign Language Research". *Language and Communication*.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the recent past, different names were used for the sign language used in Flanders, mostly 'Belgian Sign Language' and 'Flemish Belgian Sign Language'. However, because of the split of the national Deaf federation into two regional ones, the fewer and fewer contacts between both organizations and their members and the separate standardization processes, most Deaf people in

---

Flanders prefer to talk about 'Flemish Sign Language'. This is also the term which was adopted by the Flemish Deaf Federation Fevlado at its last AGM in October 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In the Total Communication approach the most important aspect is that communication takes place, using whatever means suitable to the individual deaf child (i.e. speech, fingerspelling, signing, pantomime, etc.). In reality, though, the communication method used often involves a type of 'simcom' or simultaneous communication, so that users support spoken words with signs with total disregard of sign language grammatical structures.

<sup>3</sup> It is customary to write *Deaf* with a capital letter *D* for deaf people who regard themselves as members of a linguistic and cultural minority group of sign language users regardless of their degree of hearing loss and to write *deaf* with a small letter *d* when not referring to this linguistic and cultural minority group.

<sup>4</sup> i.e. the 'Nationale Vereniging van Katholieke Doofstommen' or the National Federation of Catholic Deaf-Mutes.

<sup>5</sup> "(...) Navekados is not in favour of education by means of Sign Language. It does point to the need for the deaf person to be allowed to express himself in a way which comes natural to him, otherwise he would lose his identity. We must have a sign language which respects the linguistic rules. That is the best way to counter linguistic deficiency."

<sup>6</sup> We are deliberately talking about a sign interpreter training programme and not about a sign language interpreter training programme.

<sup>7</sup> At the time this was referred to as 'interpretation', although 'transliteration' would probably be a more accurate label.

<sup>8</sup> The programme was officially recognised by the Department of Education in 1988.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. 'Nederlandstalige Dovenunie' or Union of Dutch-speaking deaf people

<sup>10</sup> A CODA is a 'Child Of a Deaf Adult'. The term usually refers to hearing people with Deaf parents and a sign language as their mother tongue.

<sup>11</sup> The first sworn interpreters received this recognition on the basis of their experience, not on the basis of a relevant diploma.

<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it is quite striking that the words 'tolken gebarentaal' are used and not 'tolken Vlaamse Gebarentaal' (Flemish Sign Language interpreters).

<sup>13</sup> The fact that it was a Deaf teacher was extremely important for all the participants since it was the first time that they were confronted with a Deaf teacher.

<sup>14</sup> cf. <http://www.fevlado.be/themas/gebarentaal/overzicht.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> Various Members of Parliament actually mentioned in their speeches during the discussion of the recognition of VGT in Flemish Parliament that the fact that they had seen interpreters use VGT on a daily basis for the one Deaf MP in Parliament had convinced them more than any document could have done.