

German Sign Language (DGS) as an instance of an endangered language?

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to call attention to the fact that the existence of sign languages like German Sign Language is in danger. I would like to point out the factors that led to this development and to outline its extent. Firstly, I will give a very short introduction to sign language. In (2.), I will present the factors that led to the endangerment of sign languages: there are prejudices against the speakers (paternalism und discrimination, also with respect to public life), and reaction to this is personal withdrawal and social dissociation. In addition, there is a medicalisation of the speakers, a bias concerning the concurrent acquisition of a spoken and a signed language, a degradation of the language itself and deficiency of institutional support of the language as well as a lack of knowledge about the culture and its products. In (3.) I will try to evaluate these factors by referring to the sociolinguistic concept of vitality (see Giles, Bourhis/Taylor 1977) and will conclude with a calculation of the danger that German Sign Language will cease to exist in the future. It will be demonstrated that German Sign Language is an atypical example for an endangered language. The main reason for this estimation is the fact that there are also many young speakers, as well as the observation that all of the speakers are strongly trying to maintain their language and use it as often as they can. However, the analysis of DGS allows considering some recommendations for the preservation of languages in general.

1 Short introduction to sign languages

German Sign Language is a natural language. It is not invented and has a complex grammar relying on the use of space to express grammatical categories. German Sign Language is produced by visible movements of the body and perceived rather by the eye than the ear. It is a visual language. As a mother tongue, it is spoken by a minority of people, deaf people and their hearing children. According to the National Association of the Deaf (Deutscher Gehörlosen-Bund e.V.), there are about 80,000 deaf people in Germany (see DGB 2012). Unfortunately, there are no figures on how many of them use German Sign Language for their everyday communication. From a semiotic point of view, three different forms of manual communication can be distinguished:

(1.) German Sign Language (shortened DGS) has a syntax of its own, mainly displayed by the use of space, and which consists of manual as well as non-manual forms – you have to use the muscles of your face, your eyes, your head and your shoulders to produce it. (2.), there is the so-called finger-alphabet, which is a 1:1-translation of the Latin-Greek alphabet into positions of your hand. It is a part of DGS and is mainly used for the spelling of proper names such as personal names, products or

cities¹. Thirdly (3.), there is Signed German (Lautsprachbegleitendes Gebärden, in short LBG), which is an invented substitute for German Sign Language. It is more or less a literal translation from spoken German into gestures and it follows the German syntax. LBG is used to teach German to deaf people. It is also very useful for people, who are hard of hearing and who rely on spoken language.

In between (1) and (3.) there is another form, which has been identified as so-called Home Signs (see Frishberg 1987, Goldin-Meadow 2003). It is characterised by its reduced lexicon and syntax. Deaf people who are living at the periphery of the deaf community and whose contacts to other people are determined by spoken languages or gestures use it.

In practice, the three forms cannot be clearly separated: for example if a deaf person speaks to a hearing person without any command of a Sign Language, he or she also might use forms that are characteristic for Home-Signing.

2 Factors that led to the endangered status of signed languages

Section two consists of a list of the factors that justify speaking of German Sign Language as an endangered language.

2.1 Prejudices against the speakers (paternalism und discrimination with respect to public life)

The majority of hearing people think in a special way about deaf people. Deaf persons are not thought of as normal, because they lack the sense of hearing. They are considered persons, who need help. It is interesting that the way the hearing community attempts to help deaf people is based on beliefs shaped by hearing conceptions of how the life of deaf persons has to be improved. As a hearing subject, one cannot imagine that there is no special advantage in hearing. Being not able to hear is conceptualized as a clear deficit that requires a special treatment. In contrast, especially young deaf people emphasise that they do not perceive themselves as handicapped persons with regard to the sense of hearing. They do not feel the need for a particular care or a therapy and emphasise that they are happy without benevolent attention. For deaf persons the endeavours of the hearing ones are often taken for paternalism. This impression is understandable, since the access to some areas of public life is hindered. If you are deaf, you are not always in the full possession of the normal rights a citizen has, for example the right to have an easy access to information (see 2.6).

A new period of self-confidence began during the last decade, and it has led to a more positive self-esteem of deaf people (see for the concept of Empowerment Jankowski 1997 and the Deaf Empowerment Foundation). Deaf persons have initiated many campaigns to improve their situation in everyday life. Among other things, they fight for the better availability of interpreters and more and better subtitles on television (see for example the signature initiatives and demonstration for 100% subtitles on TV: Taubenschlag 2013).

¹ Unless there are conventionalised name signs in use.

2.2 Withdrawal and dissociation as a consequence of 2.1

When deaf people come into contact with the hearing majority, they recognise that hearing subjects have prejudices against them and tend to patronise them. In sum, they experience that they are disabled (cf. Lane 1999: 6ff). As a result, they conceive of themselves as different. A healthy reaction to this is to look for individuals, who are different in the same way and to come together. And this is exactly what happens: deaf people enjoy gathering with other deaf people, who share identical experiences, have a common background, have similar interests and speak the same language. There is a strong relationship within the deaf community. They meet in their spare time to sign to each other. The amount of deaf people, who are part of a deaf club or association, is much greater than the contrasting amount of hearing people (cf. Goldschmidt 2006: 32-36). Within this companionship, deaf people sometimes seal themselves off from the hearing community. They dissociate in special groups. Therefore it is not easy to come into close contact with them, which means a special frustration for the ‘helping section’ of the hearing people. As a consequence, the mutual understanding of hearing and deaf people is somewhat disturbed.

2.3 Medicalisation of the speaker (cochlea implant)

The term *medicalisation* describes a process, in which formerly healthy people are conceptualised as ill. One recent example that illustrates medicalisation is the detection of the climacteric period and the resulting treatment for male persons². At the core of the medicalisation process there is an artificial replacement of the ability to hear, a hearing aid which is implanted. This implant is called a cochlea implant. It has been part of modern medicine for 25 years and is generally able to restore the sense of hearing. However, it is different from a hearing aid: it is implanted in the inner ear deep inside the head and cannot be removed easily. Even with a successful implant, you are still hearing-impaired (see Szagun 2010). You are reliant on batteries and carry the stigma of a visible implant. The cochlea implant does not remove all the hearing problems. The outcome of a cochlea implant depends on individual factors, but even if it is a full success, it cannot restore the whole acoustic spectrum or turn a deaf person into a hearing one.

Four major problems are connected with the cochlea implant. (1.) First, nine out of ten deaf children have hearing parents. These parents know very little, sometimes nothing about deaf culture. As soon as they come into contact with the doctors, or even before, they consider their child ill³. This leads to the second problem: (2.) the doctors want to help the children restore their hearing and usually know very little about deaf culture and the deaf way of living. So they offer the parents of the deaf children the possibility of a cochlea implant, which is paid for by the German health insurance funds. In close collaboration with other social services, some advise the parents to keep their children away from contact with the deaf culture (cf. Lane 1999: 24, Wikipedia “Cochleaimplantat”, see also paragraph 2.4) because they think that learning sign

² Harlan Lane uses the term medicalisation in his 1992 book *The mask of benevolence* (German: *Die Maske der Barmherzigkeit*) to specify the kind of help hearing people consider to be appropriate for the deaf (cf. Lane 1999: 23ff).

³ In 2010, a controversy started, in which it was questioned if hearing parents should be forced to implant their children (for the pros see Müller & Zaracko 2010, for the cons see Heßmann 2010 and Hintermair 2010). It was even discussed if the parents should suffer a loss of child custody if they reject an implant.

language would slow down or prevent the process of learning a spoken language (for this view see Peterson, Pisoni/Miyamoto 2010, for the contrary position see the statements of the DGB 2006 and the ÖGLB 2006). (3.) The third problem, which is connected with the cochlea implant, is the fact that the doctor's advice is to implant as early as possible, generally at the age of two or three. That means that the child itself cannot be part of the decision process⁴. Neither the parents nor the doctors can be made responsible for this fatal situation, because they share a common information deficit, caused by the beliefs of society. One task of the hearing community is to realise that you need more than the sense of hearing to be happy in life. (4.) The last major problem is the industry that produces the implants: they are keen on selling as many implants as possible and trivialise the risks of the operation as well as the consequences for the social life and the psychological development of the child (cf. Wrobel 2013: 260f)⁵.

Therefore several organisations of the deaf, as well as many deaf clubs and deaf individuals, express their fear that their culture and their way of life might cease to exist because of these practises. Some linguists like Lane (1992) and Uhlig (2012) speak of genocide⁶. It is remarkable that this kind of problem exists only in wealthy societies with a well-developed social service and a strong oral tradition⁷, as in Germany or Switzerland: in countries like Uganda for example, people simply cannot afford a cochlea implant.

2.4 The bias concerning the concurrent acquisition of a spoken and a signed language

There is a strong bias concerning the concurrent acquisition of sign language and spoken language. In contrast to the results in research concerning the acquisition of two spoken languages, many people working in medical or educational services believe that coming into contact with a sign language prevents deaf children from learning a spoken language (see Breiner 1986). Since it is very difficult to acquire a spoken language if you cannot hear very well, the doctor advise the parents to keep their children away from the deaf community. Although linguistic research has shown that it is easier to learn a second language if you once learned a first one, regardless whether it is a spoken or a signed language (cf. Hänel-Faulhaber 2012: 309), deaf children of hearing parents – and that is the majority – sometimes make their first contact with other deaf persons very late in their lives. This problem does not occur with deaf children of deaf parents. Linguistic research has shown that deaf children of deaf parents normally achieve better grades in school and even have better writing and reading skills in foreign spoken languages (see Hennies 2010, Krammer 2001, Kramer/Grote 2009).

The pure oral education with its concentration on lipreading and articulation has a long tradition in Germany: in 1880, there was a congress in Milan in Italy, where the educationalists got together to discuss on the method that should be used for teaching the deaf. After excluding the deaf educationalists, they decided to follow the German

⁴ Janssen (2012) points out, that some of the information materials for parents are one-sided and rely on the acquisition of spoken German.

⁵ The modern idea of teaching deaf children in 'normal' schools, practising a concept called inclusion, can also lead to disagreeable psychological and social consequences, see Klumper 2013; for general considerations concerning the implementation of the concept of inclusion in the German society, see (Hase 2012).

⁶ I assume that *ethnocide* is the more appropriate term.

⁷ For the use of the term *oral*, see 2.4.

proposal, which included the concentration on lipreading and articulation training. This became known as the "German Method" or the "oral method". It has been shown that the bias of concentrating on lipreading and articulation training disables the cognitive development of deaf children (see Swanwick 2011).

Since the majority of deaf children have hearing parents, and education in Germany usually follows the German method, the deaf children usually get their first education in a spoken language, namely German (modified by the use of Signed German) – including all the consequences described above.

One of the results is, that deaf speakers are bilingual: every deaf person is able to read and write German, some of them also speak German very well, although they cannot hear at all.

2.5 Degradation of the language itself

There is another historical tradition that accounts for the fact that sign languages are endangered: it is the degradation of the language itself. Until the late 1960ies sign languages are said to have been insufficient substitutes for spoken languages. They were taken to be restricted codes, primitive languages reflecting the primitive cognitive capacities of their speakers (cf. Ebbinghaus/Heßman 1989: 37). Even linguists thought that sign languages were not real languages. One of the major prejudices was that signers are only able to speak about concrete things that are located in the surrounding space. In combination with the bad evaluation of the language status of gestures, people thought that signs are entities that cannot be segmented and therefore are not suitable for forming a real language. As a result of the work of William Stokoe and his colleagues in 1965, these opinions turned out to be false. With the development of sign language linguistics as an academic discipline, linguists worked out that sign languages are linguistically complex languages and share all of the common grammatical features that can be found in spoken languages (see Papaspyrou et al. 2008).

2.6 Deficiency of institutional support for DGS

There is a lack of institutional support for sign languages and their speakers. It is characterised by a difficult access to public information, limited availability of interpreters and an unsatisfactory schooling situation. In other countries like Finland a deaf person gets a personal interpreter to study at university, whereas in Germany there is only one regular school for the deaf where you can get your diploma to go to university. It is not unusual in Germany that you can become a teacher for the deaf without speaking more than a couple of signs. There are only a few schools for the deaf using sign language as an instructional language, and if doing so, these are ongoing projects and not stable parts of the curriculum. If teachers use signs in the class, it is mostly restricted to Signing German (LBG) (cf. Borgwardt 2012: 386). It is remarkable that there was a renaming of many schools for the deaf children in 2010: they are no longer called Schools for the Deaf, but Schools for Hearing and Communication. Furthermore, many deaf people are out of work. It is not possible to get any figures, but a short look at the offers for deaf persons indicates, that every big city organises special groups for the jobless. Furthermore, only 10 to 40% of the television programmes in Germany are provided with subtitles or superimposition of translators, depending on the sender (see Schneider 2012), in comparison to 80% in Great Britain. Since the right of free access to information is part of the German fundamental laws, there is definitely a need for change.

2.7 Lack of knowledge about the culture and its products

Normally, hearing persons do not have much contact with deaf persons, a situation which partly arises from the separation of the deaf and the hearing ways of living. The community of the deaf possesses a special culture, which is marked by visual characterisations: if you are deaf, you rely on vision. The use of modern communication systems like short messaging, online communication or postings in the Internet is widespread. Deaf people also share common estimations. Because of experiencing the world in a similar way, they have a common background, which determines their way of life. In this world, the grade of residual hearing is not important at all, more important is whether your parents are deaf, too, if you are integrated in the deaf community and which school you attended. It is relevant for the appreciation of others, if you have deaf family members, deaf friends and a deaf mate (see Goldschmidt 2006). Your social appraisal depends on your linking to the deaf community and your commitment for the needs of the collective. There is a strong company within the group of the deaf, a kind of alliance against the discrimination from outside. Visual access to the world generates a different view of the world with different estimations. Based on these, a special culture develops, including special visual products like visual poetry or signed jokes (cf. Beecken et al. 1999: 32ff).

To sum up, there is a big difference between the prestige of German and German Sign Language, and this holds for the speakers as well. Deaf persons live a life that is different from that of hearing persons and have a value system of their own. They share similar experiences resulting in socially elaborated linguistic models to fulfil their needs, namely sign languages.

3 Evaluation of the factors presented in part 2

The UNESCO has developed a prominent scale to determine the degree of endangerment for languages (see UNESCO 2013). The scale goes from "safe" over "definitely endangered" or "severely endangered" to "extinct". These definitions rely on observations about the language use and focus on the number and the age of their speakers. The degree of endangerment is mainly determined by the fact that language death occurs if a language is merely used by old people, up to the time when there are no young speakers left.

In evaluating the endangerment status of DGS caused by the factors presented in section 2, one cannot rely on the international scale UNESCO worked out, since the endangerment of DGS is not caused by the fact that younger generations do not (want to) speak it. On the contrary, it is mostly the younger speaker generation that emphasises the social, psychological and political relevance of a language of its own. They generally share a common perspective on the ideas of the Enlightenment in the notion of empowerment, whereas some of the older generations still personally suffer from the discrimination of DGS during the last century that they think of sign language as being detrimental. Since the UNESCO scale is therefore not useful for determining the degree of endangerment of sign languages, I will refer to a well-known sociolinguistic publication that appeared in 1977, when evaluating the factors presented in part (2.): Giles, Bourhis/Taylor have worked out three criteria for appraising language use and ethnicity in intergroup communication systems. They assume that

these criteria, namely status, demography and institutional support, form together something they call the vitality of a group. They define this vitality as follows:

The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations (Giles, Bourhis/Taylor 1977: 308).

In sum, the vitality of a language group allows us to estimate the likeliness that a specific language group will cease to exist in the future. First, I will concentrate on the status of the speakers and their language. The economic status of the deaf is rather low: instead of recognising the potential that lies in their particular capacities to see, and offering them jobs, where they are able to use their special capabilities to see, many deaf persons are out of work. The social status of the deaf is very low as well: they are considered to be handicapped persons, living on the periphery of the hearing community or even outside. Looking at the social history, it becomes clear that being deaf has always been a big disadvantage. But, as already explained, discrimination of the speech community is a factor that binds deaf people together. Although deaf people do not use any special symbols to reveal their particular identity or membership to the group of the deaf, they generally recognise themselves immediately – they simply notice it when meeting another deaf person.⁸ The language status is endangered by the negative attitude hearing persons take; seen within the deaf group it is the other way round: many members are very proud of their language and use it as often as they can.

In the following are some remarks on demography. Deaf groups occupy no special national geographic area: there is no national territory, but you can observe, that they come together in the big cities. They are concentrated in Munich, Berlin or Cologne and enjoy meeting each other. The absolute proportion of deaf people in Germany is rather low; it lies around 0,01% of the whole population. The birth rate of children is about 1 to 1000: One out of a thousand children are deaf. There are only a few mixed marriages. Most deaf people marry a mate, who is also deaf. As a hearing person, it is unlikely, that you will become part of the language group and become accepted as a full member. But, if you are deaf and already part of the language group, it is very unlikely that you will leave it, because you find people there who communicate easily and in a natural way. In addition, the formal and informal institutional support of deaf people leaves a lot to be desired. The rate of available information transmitted per mass media is too low. Social services do not provide interpreters for everyday situations (for example if you have to go to hospital or would like to acquire a driving licence). Education still concentrates on the acquisition of a spoken language, on lipreading and articulation training. Deaf people do not have a religion of their own, but they clearly have a culture of their own. Industry provides special offers for deaf people, for example hearing aids, cochlea implants or items for everyday life, such as alarm-clocks that work with light (see Giles, Bourhis/Taylor 1977).

To conclude and sum up, it seems very interesting for the analysis of endangered languages that in the case of sign languages the vitality of the language group seems to be very high, although there are a lot of limitations that threaten their existence. Sign languages seem to be a special case of endangered languages, because their speakers simply stick to using their language and form a group which is likely never to disappear completely: deaf people love their language and refuse to give it up, because for them it

⁸ How they manage to recognize each other is a miracle to me.

is the easiest and most natural method of communication. The analysis of DGS as a case of endangered languages shows that social cohesion plays a major role in preserving language and with that a culture. The following three criteria might be relevant for saving spoken languages as well:

- it is important to emphasise the difference of the language groups to others and to communicate that being different from a cultural majority is an advantage
- it is conducive for keeping a language to establish a special system of in-group support (maybe something like that in the student corporations or the Lions Clubs)
- people of the language group should be taught to be proud of their culture

In sum, it is possible to classify DGS as an endangered language, a language whose existence is threatened by a social majority. This majority can be determined as us – the group of hearing people.

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