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The “Language issue”

The struggle and path for the recognition of LIS

Carlo Geraci and Humberto Insolera

Introduction

The struggle for the legal recognition of Italian Sign Language (LIS, *Lingua dei Segni Italiana*)¹ isn't over yet. It officially started in the mid-nineties as a dispute between medical and linguistic perspectives on LIS and quickly changed into an issue of social inclusion after Italy ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009 (hereafter ‘the UN Convention’). Currently, the Netherlands (see Cokart et al., this volume) and Italy are the last two European Member States without a law recognizing the national sign language. The “sign language issue”, namely the struggle to have official recognition of sign language in Italy, is rooted many decades earlier, and in certain respects interacts with the pursuit of a standard for spoken Italian, known among historians of Italian as “the language issue”.

“We made Italy, now we have to make the Italians”. This motto is attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio, one of the most prominent Italian statesmen and pro-unification supporters of the mid 19th century (Gigante, 2011). The motto aimed at saying that despite territorial unification there was no identification with the Italian nation yet and that this would be the primary challenge for the newly established nation/state. The “language issue”, namely the issue of what would be the language of the new nation, was at the center of the political debate. There were two positions, each with their own supporters: one aiming at a diglossia solution, with local dialects used as a proxy to target Italian, identified with the language of famous writers of thirteenth and fourteenth century; and a top-down solution aiming at imposing Italian as the only language of the nation, removing local dialects from the scene.

¹ The original name of the language was *Lingua Italiana dei Segni*, hence the acronym LIS. The name can be traced back to the Eighties when the first publication in Italian appeared (Volterra (Ed.), *La Lingua Italiana dei Segni*, 1987). However, the Italian phrase can be misinterpreted as meaning a kind of signed Italian, rather than the sign language used in Italy. Nowadays people refer to LIS as *lingua dei segni italiana* (Italian sign language). Indeed the most recent edition (2004) of the same pioneering book changed the title into “*Lingua dei Segni Italiana*”.

Needless to say, the top-down solution was the one that prevailed and was strongly enforced in Italian language policy and planning. This was the climate about language diversity in the years before 1880 when in Milan, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf established oralism, namely the sole use of a spoken language, as the only way to educate deaf² children, banishing the use of sign language. This brief overview of the language issue sheds some light on why Italy was one of the countries where oralism became so widespread.

It took 130 years before the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf (ICED) expressed regret for the resolutions adopted in 1880, during the 2010 congress held in Vancouver. In that time span, studies on sign linguistics (Sandler and Lillo-Martin, 2006), language acquisition (Meier, 2016), psycholinguistics (Emmorey, 2007), and neurolinguistics (Malaia and Wilbur, 2010) proved that sign languages are natural languages. Parallel to scientific discoveries and documentations, Deaf communities around the world became aware of the status of sign languages as languages, and started fighting for the right to use their language, have it taught to Deaf children, and have access to public life through it. This was also the case in Italy, where parallel to the international scientific discoveries and the pioneering work of Virginia Volterra and her group at the CNR (National Research Council) of Rome, Deaf associations started claiming their right to use LIS (see Geraci, 2012 for LIS language and policy).

Despite the efforts of the Italian Deaf community, the scientific community, and part of the political world, LIS has not been legally recognized yet. In this chapter, we focus on the issues at stake, and the arguments used for and against recognition. We will see that strong positions are taken against the recognition of LIS as a language. These positions are claimed not just by associations defending oralism, but also by medical associations like the Italian association of audiologists. These positions became apparent during the debate about the most recent bill for LIS recognition proposed during the 2013-2018 legislative session (XVII Legislature). Like previous attempts in the XVI Legislature (2008-2012), this one as well was not approved before the end of the legislative session. Nonetheless, several local governments (Italian regions) approved and supported LIS and its use in many ways and domains, which brought about the paradoxical situation with LIS being recognized by the majority of local governments but not by the national government.

² In this chapter we will adopt the convention to refer to deaf signers and their communities by using the capital 'D'. We use the lower case to refer to the physical condition.

In the rest of the chapter, we offer a detailed analysis of the Italian situation. In Section 0, we discuss the major approaches to sign language (linguistic, medical and social) and how they are mirrored in the Italian debate on LIS recognition. In Section 0 we present the main points of the bill discussed in the Italian parliament during the XVII Legislature. In Section 0, we present the main arguments of the campaigners in favor and against the recognition of LIS. In Section 0, we summarize the recent debate in the Italian Senate (Oct. 3, 2017). In Section 6, we discuss the factors that led to the current situation, and the possibilities for a successful recognition of LIS.

Main views on sign language

When it comes to defining the status of sign languages, three main perspectives are normally offered on the plate of the political debate: the linguistic, the medical and the socio-cultural views (Reagan, 1995). In this section we provide an overview of how these three approaches are represented in the Italian debate around the recognition of LIS.

The linguistic view considers sign languages as natural languages on a par with spoken languages. This position has been officially stated in a document on language policy by one of the most influential Italian linguists, former minister of Education, Tullio De Mauro (De Mauro, 2016). The supporters of this view provide evidence ranging from purely technical (Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006) and linguistic (Lillo-Martin, 2008; Lucas, Bayley & Valli, 2001; Geraci *et al.* 2011, i.a) to cognitive (Geraci, Gozzi, Cecchetto and Papagno 2008; Goldin-Meadow and Brentari 2017; Wilson and Emmorey 1997, i.a.) and biological (Malaia & Wilbur, 2010; Poitzer et al., 1987). Deaf people are the main users of sign language, but hearing people may also have access to them either as a natural language, in the case of children born into signing families, or learned as a second language. According to this view, sign languages should be treated on a par with other languages and policy makers are expected to grant sign languages status as languages, and support sign language communities as language minorities implementing policies of inclusion like. Deafness as a biological, medical or social condition and deaf education in the broad sense should be considered independently from the linguistic status of sign language.

The medical view subordinates sign language to the by-product of a sensory deprivation (hearing loss). Deafness is seen as a reversible condition that modern technologies paired with substantial speech therapy may reduce up to the point of being an irrelevant or minor situation in deaf people's everyday. The status of sign language is irrelevant to the real problem: deafness. Sign languages are considered tools to medically assess/treat deafness and as such should be evaluated against other rehabilitation techniques. In this respect, the medical view splits in two slightly different approaches. Under the most utilitarian view, sign languages constitute a more or less essential plus which should be given to deaf children in addition to the most advanced technological aids. The other approach sees sign languages as an obstacle towards the process of full rehabilitation from a "medical" condition, which is clearly associated with a "language deficit" view. Although there is hardly any scientific proof, the claim is that deaf children exposed to sign language would find the "tool" so effective that they give up achieving the highest levels of proficiency in spoken language. As a direct consequence of this assumption, deaf people's quality of life would be suboptimal because the use of sign language would make the disability plain and clear and deaf people would be easily stigmatized as handicapped. Finally, in the comparative approach of remedies for deafness, sign languages shouldn't be given any priority because i) genetically transmitted deafness is such a rare situation that only a very small minority of deaf children would benefit from them; ii) congenital but not genetically transmitted deafness should be better treated by removing the hearing impairment rather than using a tool (communication mode) that would amplify the disability; iii) sign languages are ineffective for late acquired deafness. According to this view, the status of sign language is irrelevant. Policy makers should either give it a complementary role in the treatment of deafness or should favor other tools (including universal new-born hearing screening), which, at least in Italy, aim at removing deafness as a condition that undermines the independence of deaf people in everyday life, and do not consider sign language to be a part of the intervention.

The socio-cultural view treats sign language as part of deaf people's broader situation. It is the fundamental ingredient of the group identity based on positively valued features (Lane 1999). Language awareness is thus one ingredient of a way richer recipe, which includes a shared history, stories, cultural traditions, various art forms, and a deaf social network. The socio-cultural view supports all the arguments of the linguistic view and aims at giving sign language the status of a natural language. It differs from the linguistic view in that it goes beyond the formal recognition of a language per se but aims at recognizing Deaf communities

as minority groups which should be preserved and supported and included in the dominant cultural community. In the long-term perspective of full inclusion, medical interventions are not seen as being a priori incompatible with sign language and the existence of Deaf communities. They are part of the free choices made by the families of deaf children. In this view, policy makers should enforce all the policies to recognize and support Deaf communities and sign languages and to include Deaf communities with the dominant community by removing barriers and stigmatization of deafness as a disability in all environments.

The path for recognition

Italy ratified the UN Convention in 2009. Still, there is no specific law recognizing LIS as the language of the Italian Deaf and Deaf-blind community. Timmermans (2005) briefly summarizes the various attempts to recognize LIS in the nineties, while Geraci (2012) discusses the debate around LIS in the early 2000s. Beside the various international resolutions and conventions that the Italian Governments approved but never implemented, the situation is even more complex because in 1999, the government approved a law to support language minorities. This is law 482/1999, which defines as minority languages those languages that are relatively far from Italian historically and typologically and, crucially, whose communities of speakers are concentrated in specific regions of the country. In other words, this law anchors language minorities to specific geographical areas, excluding a priori LIS, which is used throughout the country (see Geraci, 2012 for a more detailed discussion). The latest attempt to recognize LIS before the one described in this chapter goes back to 2011-2012, when the Senate approved a bill which recognized LIS as the language of the Italian Deaf community (Bill 831/2008). The bill did not pass through the Parliament before the end of the legislative session in part because of the lobby of LIS opponents (Geraci, 2012).

Still, LIS has implicit recognition, especially in schools and universities, by the framework law on assistance, social integration and rights of people with disabilities (Law 104/1992, further modified in 2000 and 2001). Among other things, Law 104/1992 recognizes the right to have access to education by using “specialized languages” (article 8, section 1c). This is the crucial provision that allows LIS to be used in official and institutional situations even without explicit recognition as a language. Several regional governments, to whom social and

health policies are delegated, took advantage of this possibility and recognized LIS at the local level. The timeline of the most relevant laws and proposals is sketched below:

Table 1: Timeline of Laws and Proposals

	Law 104/1992 Disability	Law 482/1999 Minority languages	2009 UN Conv. ratified by Italy	2008-2012 Bill 831/2008	2013-2018 Bill 302/2013
Descr.	“Specialized languages” can be used in the education of disabled people.	Minority languages are recognized, but not LIS	SL must be recognized	Recognition of LIS, as the language of the Deaf community (linguistic view).	Recognition of LIS, and LIS (tactile LIS) as part of a general intervention on deaf people (social view).
Status	Active	Active	Active	Aborted	Aborted

It is against this background that a proposal to recognize LIS reached the parliament of the XVII Legislature. The legislative process started in March 2013, with a prospected duration of five years. On March 26, 2013, Senator Antonio De Poli of the centrist party, Scelta Civica, filed a bill on the “rights of deaf people, people with hearing loss and deafblind people”. The bill was then assigned to Senator Francesco Russo of the Democrat Party as rapporteur. The first draft only contained three articles, one defining the general frame of the proposal within the policies to implement human rights and the recognition of LIS; one about general dispositions of the situations in which the use of LIS should be supported; and a technical article on budgetary neutrality (see below). The draft was then assigned to the committee on constitutional affairs and discussed in the Senate. It took four years for the bill to be approved by one of the two Chambers (the Senate voted in favor on October 3, 2017). Unfortunately, the legislative session ended before the second Chamber (the Parliament) could approve the bill. All information about this proposal (debate in the Senate, expert

auditions and discussions) is available on the website of the Italian Senate.³ The reason why it took so long for the Bill to go from presentation to first approval is the discussion in the Senate, in which several experts and representatives of Deaf associations were asked to present their arguments in favor (or against) recognition of LIS (see Section 0). In the remainder of this section, we introduce the main provisions of the bill.

The proposal debated at the national level during the XVII Legislature

The bill discussed during the XVII legislature aimed at recognizing the citizenship rights of deaf people, people with hearing loss and deafblind people and contains 14 articles. We first present here the main points of the bill and then we comment on them.⁴

The very first article of the Bill defines the main goal by recognizing “the rights of deaf people, hard of hearing and deafblind people”. It recognized LIS and tactile LIS as languages “within a bilingual environment (Italian/LIS)” in which deaf people should be given access both to Italian and LIS. Article 2 (“free choice and non-discrimination”). Introduced “the right for deaf people, hard of hearing, deafblind people and their families to freely choose any communication modality, education and tools to implement full social inclusion [...]” in addition and in parallel to LIS. Note that the text of the bill implicitly distinguished between “tools that can be used to prevent and cure deafness and deafblindness” like neonatal screening and other technological innovations, and LIS and LIS_t which are given the status of language. Article 3 is about “prevention and early identification of deafness and deafblindness and about the tools to be used to reduce or fix the hearing deficit and the visual deficit”. It included a reference to neonatal screening for every child so that deafness can be early detected. Article 4 is about “accessibility to communication, information public spaces and public administration”. Article 5 established the right for deaf and deafblind students to have a teacher assistant, a communication assistant or a (tactile) LIS interpreter at all levels of education, within a general view that also guarantees access to spoken Italian (at least in the written form). It also encouraged the creation of mixed classes with hearing and deaf students

³ There are different ways in which a law can be proposed in Italy. Independently from the procedure, the text of each Italian law has to be approved by both Chambers, the Parliament and the Senate. In this particular case the bill was first approved by the Senate and then sent to the Parliament. The link to the webpage of the bill is: <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/42737.htm>, while the video of the discussion and first approval in the Senate can be found here:

<http://webtv.senato.it/video/showVideo.html?seduta=888&leg=17&xmid=1017>

⁴ The original text of the bill is written in Italian. Unless otherwise specified, the quotations reported in the chapter are English translations made by Carlo Geraci.

and delegated to the university system the task of training qualified communication assistants and interpreters. Articles 6-11 described the various environments in which (tactile) LIS can be used to guarantee social inclusion. Article 13 was specifically devoted to regulate the profession of (tactile) sign language interpreting. Finally, article 14 of the bill included a budgetary neutrality clause that no additional costs must be generated by the implementation of the law, if approved.

The spirit of this bill was influenced by the socio-cultural view on deafness, as per the UN Convention. This is clear by the fact that its main target is the right to citizenship rather than access to (sign) language. LIS and tactile LIS are given official status as means to achieve social inclusion. Nonetheless, (tactile) LIS plays a central role in achieving this goal, while technological supports are only marginally mentioned in the relevant articles. Another clear indication of a socio-cultural perspective comes by comparing the first draft of the bill with the current one. In the article recognizing LIS and tactile LIS and in the article regulating social inclusion in schools the use of (tactile) LIS was mentioned together with an identical right to have access to monolingual education in spoken language (e.g., oralist education), the choice being left to the individual or their family. In the later draft of the proposal, any reference to oralism has been removed and article 5 pairs bilingual education with total communication (which is left undefined).

A few further comments are in order. Overall, the bill incorporates the main aspects of the UN Convention and makes explicit reference to Deaf and Deafblind people as target of LIS and tactile LIS. The explicit provisions on Deafblind people and tactile sign language are an innovation compared to previous bills. However, the decision on which approach is more adequate to achieve social inclusion is left to the individual or their family. Finally, the budgetary neutrality clause may undermine any implementation of the proposal. It is obvious that implementing bilingual programs in schools, creating sign language interpreting tracks at the university level, providing accessible environment at work, museums, etc. involves additional costs. There is thus a serious risk that social inclusion is guaranteed only on paper.

The struggle for recognition

In this section we review the major arguments in favor and against the recognition of LIS. Compared to what happened during the discussion around bill 831/2008, where campaigners

supporting LIS organized protests and marches (Geraci, 2012), this time the discussion has been less emotional and was publicly held in the Senate, with written documents issued as part of the proceedings. Despite the bill targeting the social inclusion of Deaf and Deafblind people, the core of the discussion was about whether and why LIS should be recognized. In addition to campaigners, experts from various fields have been heard in the Senate in the months that preceded the discussion. The main arguments are summarized in this section. The original documents can be downloaded from the Senate website.⁵

The view of the campaigners in favor of LIS

There are several Deaf associations in Italy that support LIS. The oldest and most prominent one is the national Association of Deaf people, Ente Nazionale Sordi (ENS), which first and before any other association campaigned for a law recognizing LIS. On the same side and with very similar arguments stand other Deaf associations and movements (e.g., LIS Subito), the associations of LIS interpreters (e.g., Anios), the State School for Deaf people (Istituto Statale Sordi di Roma), associations supporting Italian-LIS bilingualism (e.g., Vedo Voci, Il Treno, and Il Sentiero Dorato), and the national association of Deafblind people, Lega del filo D'Oro.

All these associations recognize LIS as a natural language, providing references to the standard scientific literature, especially work done by the group headed by Virginia Volterra at the CNR in Rome. In the use of sign language they see i) an opportunity that should be offered possibly with other strategies in the education of deaf children (e.g., speech therapy), ii) an option to overcome communication barriers and guarantee equal access and equal rights in all aspects of a person's life. They also claim the need to establish a controlled protocol to provide unbiased information about the various options available to families with deaf children. They see deafness not just as a sensory deprivation but also as a social condition directly related to the individual identity.

The view of the campaigners against LIS

The opponents to the recognition of LIS are mainly oralist associations and associations of families with deaf children. These associations do not conceive Deaf communities as cultural

⁵ <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/42737.htm>.

minorities and consider the recognition of LIS to be an overt stigmatization of deaf people. They propose a view of deafness as a disability. In what follows, we summarize their main arguments against the recognition of LIS and offer counter arguments showing their inconsistency.

The first argument tries to undermine the status of LIS as a language. It comes in two versions: one is based on the assumption that it is inconceivable to base the identity of a community on a disability. Without formal recognition of a community, there is no need to recognize its language. The problem with this argument is that it is based on the false assumption that deafness rather than the language itself is the real factor that brings Deaf people together. Deaf communities are such not just because deaf people share social affiliation but because they share a language. The other version of the argument is based on the fact that even if LIS is given the status of a language, it does not have the same expressive power as spoken languages and even in that case, it would still be missing a written form. In this second version, the argument is based on two false assumptions; the first one is that sign languages are inferior to spoken languages, the second is that the use of LIS automatically excludes access to the spoken language (via lipreading or in the written form). Both these assumptions have been countered by scientific research on LIS (see for instance Volterra, 2004; Terrugi, 2003).

A second argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* and tries to disprove the utility of LIS as a “tool” for deaf people. The argument comes in two different facets: i) the number of native signers is too small to justify implementing a system guaranteeing universal access for signers; ii) medical interventions (including genetic ones) and modern technologies by-pass the need of having an alternative communication system. While it is true that the proportion of native signers is small with respect to that of early and late learners, there is no precise information on the total number of deaf LIS signers in Italy (the ENS reports the number of 50000 thousands of users) (Pabsch & Wheatley, 2012). As for medical and technological interventions, it depicts a future solution that does not by itself answer the need to act in the immediate. Furthermore, it is unclear why the two options sign language plus medical/technological intervention should be mutually exclusive.

A third argument rejects the utility of the bill *a priori*. Indeed, rather than benefiting deaf people, this argument states that a bill recognizing LIS would favor the interests of interpreters (probably over the interests of hearing aids and cochlear implant manufacturers).

A final argument is based on costs. The cost of implementing a LIS-friendly environment for Deaf people would i) exceed the limits of the bill itself, and ii) would subtract resources from/going to other (medical) interventions. The first point is true in general of any budgetary neutrality clause, and can be countered: as a matter of principle, economic concerns are not superior to human rights. As for the second point, one may argue that beside cases of special language impairment (which are independent from deafness), the acquisition of sign language is an inevitable consequence of exposure for children and provides deaf people benefits both at the individual and the social level (many thanks to Natasha Abner for pointing out these aspects). This in turn may provide long-term economic benefits which could be superior to the initial investment to support SL and a Deaf-friendly environment.

It is worth mentioning that all the arguments provided by these associations are explicitly against the use and recognition of LIS but none is made against tactile LIS. Notice that very few of the arguments against LIS *a fortiori* extend to tactile LIS because Deaf and Deafblind signers are two completely different populations.

The opinion of the experts

In addition to associations campaigning in favor or against the recognition of LIS, the Senate also heard evidence from a number of (all hearing) experts. Below, we summarize the main arguments proposed by each speaker. As part of the annex documentation, the Associazione Sordi Antonio Provolo also included a commentary on the bill by the Italian Society of Otolaryngologists and the Italian Society of Audiologists, who opposed the bill. Fifty university professors from all over the country undersigned the document. Although none of the representatives of the two societies provided scientific evidence (at least to our knowledge), we include the main points of the commentary for the sake of completeness.⁶

The societies of Otolaryngologists and Audiologists acknowledge the necessity of social integration for (elderly) LIS signers, but opposes a view of a future society in which LIS

⁶ The original documents can be found on the Senate website, see footnote 5.

could play a role in the education of deaf children, the main point being that hearing aids and cochlear implants reduce the communication disability for all deaf people, with the exception of extremely rare cases (but see below the argument from Prof. Trovato). The document includes three arguments against the recognition of LIS: (1) recognizing LIS would bring it at the same level with Italian with the risk of further increasing discrimination of deaf people. The implicit inference here is that sign language use prevents proper acquisition of spoken language (contra Terrugi 2003 for the specific case of LIS); (2) the number of deaf children that currently choose a “gestural language” is small, hence this would constitute inefficient expenditure of public money, and (3) implementing a sign language friendly environment would have economical drawbacks. No reference to any scientific work has been provided to support the first argument, no quantitative measures are offered for the second one, and no cost comparison to implement a sign language friendly vs. a cochlear implanted friendly environment, let alone a cost/benefit analysis of implementing a sign language friendly environment has been offered for the third one.

Dr. Orzan, director of the audiology department of the IRCCS Hospital in Trieste, is a supporter of the medical view of deafness. Deaf people are part of a group “exclusively because they share a medical condition”, although she recognizes sign languages including LIS as natural languages. She proposed two new arguments against the use of LIS in the education of deaf children, both are acquisition arguments: one was against the use of LIS in situations of a deaf child with hearing parents; the other was in favor of early exposure to spoken language. Although there is no reference to scientific literature, it is easy to agree with the second point (see Guasti, 2007 for studies on spoken Italian). Early acquisition is essential for every individual. This is undeniable. However, the argument *per se* supports the acquisition of the spoken language for deaf children; it is not against the acquisition of sign language. The first argument, however, is trickier. It was used to deny the possibility of having genuine bilingualism in the case of deaf children born into hearing families. It denies the possibility that deaf children will be able to acquire sign language from a poor linguistic environment because deaf children in hearing families will not be exposed to a qualitatively adequate linguistic input. There is no evidence to support this claim coming from LIS, but there is evidence of the contrary coming from ASL showing that impoverished input is still enough to develop a fully-fledged sign language (Singleton & Newport, 2004). Finally, if Orzan’s argument goes through it could apply to deaf children born in deaf families as well,

with the clearly unwanted consequence that deaf children in deaf families should not be exposed to any spoken language because their parents would provide broken input to them.

Dr. Caselli is a cognitive scientist at the CNR in Rome and presented the advantages of having a sign-spoken bilingual education, mentioning scientific evidence that learning a sign language does not interfere with proficiency in a spoken language (Mayberry et al. 2002) and highlighting that choosing a sign language does not exclude other kinds of approaches that could and should work in parallel.

Prof. Cardinaletti is professor of linguistics at Ca' Foscari University. She pointed out that the sign modality is the only one that allows deaf people to acquire a human language by exposure without explicit training. Cardinaletti also offered another new argument in favor of using sign language: there are special populations which may benefit from sign language use. Although no scientific reference was provided, she mentioned autism, Down syndrome, dyspraxia and Landau-Kleffner syndrome.

Prof. Pavani is a cognitive scientist at the CIMeC (Trento) and provided a rich overview of scientific studies from a variety of disciplines showing that sign languages are natural languages and that sign-spoken bilingualism is not just an opportunity but it is the safest way to go when planning the education of deaf children. The rationale of the argument is the following: it is a fact that hearing aids and cochlear implants even in the ideal conditions are not a guarantee for a complete success in mastering the spoken language (this is also acknowledged by Society of Otolaryngologists and Audiologists, as mentioned above). It is also a fact that the acquisition of a sign language does not undermine the acquisition of a spoken language (if anything scientific evidence is bringing us toward the opposite conclusion). Since it is not possible to foresee in which cases there will be a failure in mastering the dominant language, it is safer for the goods of each deaf individual's cognitive (and social) life to give them early access to sign language.

Prof. Sara Trovato, from the University of Milano-Bicocca, is a specialist in Deaf education and discussed whether the right to sign language is similar to the right of language minorities or whether it is a somehow stronger, inalienable individual right. She showed that Deaf communities have the right to claim the recognition of sign language both as a language minority and as a right to have psychophysical integrity and that it is up to Deaf communities to make the call (and ultimately to politicians to implement the choice).

The discussion in the Senate

The Senate approved the bill on October 3, 2017 after an hour of debate during which members of the Senate expressed their informed opinions about whether to support the bill or not, based on the information provided by the experts and stakeholder organizations. The bill then passed to the Parliament for further discussion if no modifications were added for final approval. Unfortunately, no time was left in the legislative session to cover these final steps. The session ended on March 22, 2018 and the bill never passed (see also footnote 4). Below, we summarize the main points discussed during the debate in the Senate.

Reasons to vote against the bill

These are some of the reasons put on the table to support a vote against the bill:

1. Although LIS has an independent grammar, it is still less expressive than spoken Italian (i.e., it has lower communicative power) and it has no written form.
2. LIS is not a language because there are too many varieties and it is not standardized.
3. International sign should be used rather than LIS because it would allow deaf people to communicate with deaf people all over the world rather than with the small community of Italian signers.
4. Other kinds of intervention should be given priority, like hearing aids and cochlear implants.
5. There is no consensus among the various deaf associations on the use of LIS in the education of deaf children; hence it does not worth recognizing LIS.
6. The bill does not support deaf people but the interests of LIS interpreters.
7. The budgetary neutrality clause is fake, and the costs to support a LIS friendly environment are too high.
8. There is no financial coverage to concretely support the bill, so recognition of LIS will not improve the everyday life of deaf people.

Reasons to vote in favor of the bill

1. The systematic presence of LIS in public environments will overcome communication barriers and provide full access to society, improving the quality of life of Deaf people.
2. Bilingualism in mixed classes will help create a more inclusive society, because over the years there will be more signers even among hearing people.
3. The use of LIS is an option within a variety of possibilities for Deaf education and it is not in conflict with other approaches.

General discussion

The debate around the bill on the rights of deaf people has almost exclusively focused on whether it is appropriate to 1) recognize LIS as a natural language; 2) use LIS in the education of deaf children. Differently from previous debates, this time there has been no attempt to undermine the status of LIS as a language, for instance by proposing different names like the “mimical-gestural language” (see Geraci, 2012). There has been an attempt to undermine its utility, though, by pointing out the lack of standardization and the lack of written form. Still, the core arguments of the opponents of the recognition of LIS were that 1) the use of signs would undermine full mastery of the spoken language, 2) new technologies will eradicate deafness, and hence the need for a sign language. Part of the Senate rejected the evidence given by linguists and cognitive scientists in favor of LIS. This shows that there is still a strong ideological climate biasing opinions on sign language, also proved by the fact that no comments have been made over tactile LIS and its use by deafblind people.

Coming to what kind of right Deaf people should claim in relation to LIS, the right to be recognized as a language minority only or as a social group with other traits in addition to sharing the language, the current bill has clearly taken the latter perspective. On the one hand, this was done in part because the UN Convention suggests such a view on sign language and Deaf communities and the bill aimed at being its implementation in the Italian law system (see for instance articles from 8 to 19 of the UN Convention which are integrated in the bill articles from 6 to 11). On the other hand, recognizing LIS as a minority language would mean

changing the law on language minorities (law 482/1999). Indeed, the major obstacle for a straightforward implementation of the linguistic view about LIS is that it is at odds with the current law on language minorities. Geraci (2012) already pointed out how the legislation on linguistic minorities aimed at excluding Romani languages as minority languages based on the absence of a specified area in which the linguistic community is concentrated. LIS is an involuntary casualty of this. The only alternative left then, is to base the argument on the right to sign language as a fundamental right for humans to receive a language in the most natural way possible, because only in this way the individual is guaranteed healthy cognitive and social development.

Conclusion

Every time a new Government is formed in the Italian parliament, the Italian Deaf community, ENS and all other supporters of LIS recognition wish that this time it will be the 'good one'; that LIS gets official recognition as a language, the language of Deaf people. Each time, a bill is filed and the slow process for recognition starts. Each time, LIS campaigners know that this will be a race against the clock; that if the discussion ever starts, it will come to an end in the very last days of the legislation. Every time, they have seen the proposal not going through the final step for one reason or another.

We were facing the same situation in 2011 as well. An important result has been achieved, namely one chamber has approved the bill. After that, the situation was very similar to that of 2011, when, the bill arrived at the second chamber for final approval at the very end of the legislative session (Geraci, 2012). This time as well, the legislative session ended before the bill could have been discussed in the Parliament. The struggle of Italian deaf people to have their language recognized is not over, yet.

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