Belgium: Digitalization to unlock human rights to sign language – Yes, but at what cost?

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People use sign language at a demonstration for the International Day of Sign Language, Belgium 2018. Credit: FFSB Belgique
Both my parents and grandparents are deaf, as am I. Naturally, I have always used sign language at home since my birth. I have used French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) as my primary language alongside French and, through all the years of intense practice and use, I definitely can say: *sign languages are proper languages!*

They offer the same linguistic properties and features as spoken languages, including phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, morphological, syntactic, discourse and pragmatic levels of organization. I emphasize the plural of ‘languages’ as, contrary to the common belief, sign language is not universal – far from it: there are more than 200 different sign languages around the globe.

Throughout history, and still in some regions of the world today, the use of sign languages by deaf people has been stigmatized and discriminated against. I recall my mother and grandmother, Nicoleta and Verginia respectively – both born and living in Romania during the Communist period – explaining to me how they would get their hands beaten with a stick by their teacher if they were caught signing during classes… in the Bucharest School for the Deaf. This story is just a small drop in the ocean of lived deaf experiences.

One of the official origins of discrimination against sign language dates back to 1880 and the Second International Congress on Education for the Deaf that took place in Milan, Italy. This gathering brought together the world’s most eminent specialists on deaf education – none of them deaf themselves – to exchange and discuss the best practices for the education of the deaf. At the event’s conclusion, the congress adopted a resolution banning the use of sign language in deaf education in favour of an oral system called ‘oralism’. The message was unequivocal: sign language hinders the cognitive and linguistic development of deaf people. To strive to be a normal human being, deaf people must learn to talk.

Consequently, for more than a century, deaf people could not use their natural language in public. At worst, its use was discriminated against, mocked and repressed; at best, it was ignored. Deaf people – commonly referred to as ‘Deaf and dumb’ – could not access quality education in their national sign languages, and therefore remained isolated from their society.
The seclusion and isolation of deaf communities from information and knowledge through the medium of sign language has been progressively attenuated with the emergence of new technologies. In Belgium, it all started in the 1980s when the news on TV was interpreted in LSFB. For the first time, my deaf community could autonomously access information themselves, at the same time as their hearing counterparts.

Later on, in the 1990s, independent remote communication between deaf people finally happened, thanks to the appearance of the fax, the SMS and the Minitel, a videotex online service accessible through telephone lines that was the world's most successful online service prior to the worldwide web. They could contact each other without relying on a third party. Yet, it was reserved only for those who were literate, which represented a minority of the deaf community — a minority within the minority. The remaining deaf people, including my grandfather Joseph — a loyal member of his local deaf club in Liège, Belgium — used to say at the end of their weekly gathering: 'Let's meet here next Tuesday at eight. Don't be late!' Of course, they were late. Of course, my grandfather had to wait for his friends, sometimes for hours, because one friend's car broke down or another got sick. What other options did he have? None.

Not until the birth of the internet. Webcam. Social media. Smartphones. Big Bang! The true catalyst for the connection of deaf communities, technologies unlocked the door of the global network. We were finally free. Free to sign. Free to communicate in our preferred languages. Free to share our creativity, to share our opinions. Free to campaign online for recognition of our sign language. Technology is crucial to spread awareness of the existence of these languages and their importance for us. It is one of the keys to realizing our most fundamental human right, our right to sign.

The emergence of the digitalization era has also made it possible for deaf people to connect outside their communities in sign language through distance interpreting. Sign language interpreters can now work remotely through Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) and Video Relay Service (VRS). VRS is a telephone service where the spoken message is relayed in sign language and vice versa. VRI means that communication takes place via a video screen and at a distance. Remote interpreting can be used for different reasons and when the interpreter is not at the same location as the users: to chat with family or friends, to participate in a meeting, to order a pizza, or to access emergency response services if there has been an accident.

Accessing emergency response services in a timely manner is crucial and life-saving for everyone; deaf people are no exception. The European emergency phone number, 112, can be used by every European citizen in any area of the European Union (EU), at any time in emergency situations. Theoretically. Yet, accessible alternatives for persons with disabilities — meaning access by other means than voice, such as SMS, email, fax and text relay — is only supported by 22 of the 27
EU countries. When supported, some countries request additional fees to access those services. In addition, only eight of those countries offer the opportunity to contact emergency services in the national sign language through VRS, making our basic human right to access life-saving services a chimera in most parts of the EU. The current global Covid-19 pandemic actually highlights the dire predicament of deaf people and is a catalyst to enhancing our rights. In response to the pandemic, the Ukrainian government put in place a 24/7 remote interpreting service, affirming their global leadership in providing accessible emergency services to deaf people.

Furthermore, companies, universities, and public institutions have seen new market opportunities to develop signing avatars as a replacement for human sign language interpreters. The signing avatar is a 3D technology with a virtual character using sign language; however, it often operates with word-for-word translation, which does not take into account the local context or the cultural norms of different sign languages. Sign languages are fully-fledged languages with their own complex structures that are distinct from spoken languages. While the technology has progressed and offers real potential for wider use of signing avatars, these computerized products do not surpass the natural quality and skills provided by human interpreters and translators. There is a good reason why TV broadcasts have not replaced presenters with automated voices and avatars, even though the actual state of the technology would allow it: this produces no human feelings or identification.

The same goes for deaf people. We just do not want to be considered as second-class citizens anymore.

Another perverse technological development concerning deaf people is the signing glove. This is an electronic device which attempts to convert the motions of a sign language into written or spoken words. Although the idea looks promising and exciting on paper, it does not help deaf communities.

The issue with signing gloves is dual. First, developers often do not consult deaf people through their representative organizations to check if they are properly representing the sign language. They gain applause and recognition for technologies based on an element of deaf culture, while deaf people themselves are legally and socially left behind, making it a case of cultural appropriation. Second, while the gloves are often presented as devices to improve accessibility for the deaf, it is the signers, not

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the hearing people, who must wear the gloves, carry the computers or modify their rate of signing; the idea being that deaf people must expend the effort to accommodate themselves to the standards of communication of the hearing person.

Given the long history of repression of the use of sign language, making its importance for rendering deaf communities invisible to the eyes of society, technologies have been shown to be an invaluable tool for making our rights, our culture and our pride visible. Thanks to Skype, my grandfather Joseph could chat with his friends when he was unable to attend the weekly gathering at the local deaf club for health reasons; thanks to Facebook, my mother Nicoleta could share her opinions in LSFB of the most recent book she had read with the Belgian deaf community; thanks to the internet, I can use technology daily to participate in international meetings with sign language interpreters to support the global deaf community in our advocacy work for the realization of our human rights. The benefit of technology to us is inestimable.

Yet, there is still a long way ahead in making our society fully accessible to us, with dignity and requiring no extra cost. We urgently need a shift from the 1880 Milan Congress-based mentality to the full recognition of sign language as the fundamental basis for human rights of the deaf as we strive to be full citizens of our society. Once this goal is achieved, we can finally be equal with everyone.