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## 2 The sign language community

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**Summary** 2.1 Community characteristics. – 2.2 Sign language users. – 2.3 Deaf culture. – 2.4 Deaf education.

The present chapter addresses the cultural and social features shared by the Deaf community at national and international level. Specifically, the following sections describe: the characteristics of the Italian Deaf Community [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.1]; the sign language users [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.2]; issues related to Deaf culture, such as the name sign's system, the artistic forms of LIS (poetry, theatre, etc.), the cultural and social centres representative of the Italian Deaf community, the national and international Deaf festivals and events [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.3]; and, finally, a general overview on Deaf education in Italy [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4].

### 2.1 Community characteristics

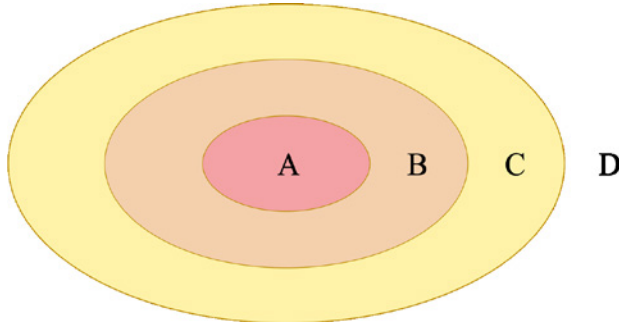
Deaf signers around the world appear to share some common features, making it possible to speak about a cultural universe of Deaf people. Indeed, the types of relationships signers establish, the interactions which occur in sign language, and the concept of time are all part of a specific cultural identity which is shared among Deaf people. Poetry, stories, rhymes and typical narrations in sign language all contribute towards improving this sense of belonging within the Deaf community.

Although nowadays general standardization processes supported by the implementation of technologies tend to unify the Deaf community, the attempt to define its boundaries still remains a complex task.

Deaf identity is based on the awareness of sharing the same language and fighting for the same purpose: the possibility to gain equality in a dominant hearing society. There is a similarity here to other historical communities which were considered minority cultures, for example ethnic or linguistic minorities who fought against the pressures of colonialism and racism towards black people, or those countering prejudices and violence directed toward the gay and lesbian communities.

On the basis of these similarities, it is possible to consider Deaf culture as a *microculture*. The anthropological studies of Deaf people are still trying to defend the autonomy and the integrity of this culture, although the definition of Deaf Culture is elusive and much debated. According to a model proposed in 1989 by two American researchers, Carol Erting and Robert Johnson, Deaf culture is based on two factors: patrimony and paternity. Patrimony refers to the unit of norms, uses and behaviours of Deaf people in addition to the positive disposition to learn and share knowledge; while paternity concerns the biological status of deafness, which is a crucial factor in being part of the Deaf culture in the strict sense. People who share both these features are part of the Deaf culture, while people who only share sign language and some of the uses of this culture are only part of the Deaf community. Indeed, Deaf community is a broader concept and involves all the people who have professional or personal relations with Deaf culture. On the basis of this theory, three different types of people can be considered part of the Deaf community: the group of native signers born into Deaf families, the Deaf people who cannot be considered native, and all the remaining people who know or use the sign language and have contacts with the Deaf culture. The hard core is composed by native signers (circle A, below), deaf children with deaf parents who have used sign language since their birth. This group is very small and represents 8/10% of signers. Another group is composed of Deaf signers who started to sign later in life (circle B, below), thanks to educational institutions or for personal reasons. Finally, a broader group is composed of hearing people (circle C, below), who have professional or personal relationships with the Deaf community. This group includes the relatives of deaf people, interpreters, educators and teachers who share variable competence in sign language. In this way, the third group represents the ideal society where Deaf and hearing people have no communication barriers thanks to the shared knowledge of sign lan-

guage. The space with the letter (D) represents, instead, all the remaining hearing part of society, with respect to which Deaf culture often defines itself.



**Figure 1** Composition of the Deaf community (recreated from Russo Cardona, Volterra 2007, 40)

The subcategories within the definition of Deaf are much more complex. Indeed, the Deaf group is far from being homogeneous, and in fact the concept of deaf can be subdivided into more specific categories such as inborn/acquired, pre-linguistic/post-linguistic, signer/oralist, child of deaf parents/child of hearing parents, with prosthesis/without prosthesis. The first refers to the period of life when the condition of deafness first appeared, namely congenital deafness or acquired. The second subcategory reflects the condition of deafness with respect to language acquisition. The third defines deaf people in relation to their linguistic choice of either the sign or spoken language. In the fourth opposition, the deaf or hearing condition of the parents can affect the social, psychological, emotional and linguistic development of the deaf child. Finally, a prosthesis or implant, generally considered as a facilitation tool for spoken language acquisition, may also affect the social, psychological, and emotional sphere and, in some cases, the linguistic competence of Deaf people and their Deaf identity.

However, all these background conditions could be considered as irrelevant if the deaf person identifies himself/herself as part of Deaf culture. Elements relating to deaf backgrounds can only be relevant in the social status of Deaf people within Deaf culture. Indeed, if a Deaf person descends from generations of Deaf people, his/her status will be proudly considered as pure Deaf.

Another sensitive topic inside the Deaf community concerns the cochlear implant. In some parts of pure Deaf groups, implants are considered as a process of cultural genocide and people who have been implanted are generally not considered pure Deaf anymore. The discussion over cochlear implants is part of broader fears shared among many Deaf people about the possibility that the Deaf culture may disappear in a few decades. Technological and scientific progresses treat deafness as an illness, trying to find a cure for it. The debate about cochlear implants is complex and implantation is far from being the final solution for acquiring the hearing status. The Italian Deaf community is divided on this topic. Deaf people are scared they might lose their sign language and they might disappear, as happened to many other minority cultures before.

A group closely related to the Deaf community is represented by Deafblind people, an almost unknown community counting 198,000 people in Italy (ISTAT, 2013). Not being able to see, hear or speak are conditions which can lead to a complete form of isolation. This is one of the reasons why Deafblind people struggle to be recognized as a community. Deafblind people communicate in different ways depending on the nature of their physical conditions, their education and their backgrounds. Method of communications include: i) the use of residual hearing or sight, for example signing with a restricted visual area, ii) Italian Tactile Signs Language (LISt) or adapted LIS, and/or iii) other communication strategies, as Screen Braille Communicator, and iv) alphabetic methods, as the *Malossi* method or the tactile dactylology. Similarly to LIS for Deaf people, LISt has been created and evolved among those Deafblind people who chose tactile sign language as a preferential communication channel.

In Italy, the first network among Deafblind people was founded in 1964 by Sabina Santilli, a Deafblind woman born in a little village of the Abruzzo region. The founded association is the *Lega del Filo d'Oro* which still today represents one of the main clubs supporting Deafblind people's rights in Italy.

## 2.2 Sign language users

This section provides relevant statistical information about deafness in general, the Deaf community, and the Deafblind situation.

**Table 1** General deaf impairments and national spread

Features	Numbers	Percentage	Descriptions
National population	60,600,000		Persons residing in Italy
Hard-of-hearing	5,000,000	8.2% of national population	Total number of people with hearing impairments (Carlo Eugeni-Unapeda)
People with hearing impairments	1,198,000	2% of national population	People with only hearing impairments as sensorial disability (ISTAT, 2013)
Women with hearing impairments	638,000	53.3% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Men with hearing impairments	560,000	46.7% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
People with hearing impairments over 65	895,000	74.7% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Nationwide:			
North-West	289,920	24.2% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
North-East	233,610	19.5% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Centre	258,770	21.6% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
South	268,350	22.4% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Islands: Sicily and Sardinia	147,350	12.3% of 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)

**Table 2** Deafness and education

<b>Features</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
Total number of scholars with hearing impairments.	6,217	2.64% of 234,788, the total number of scholars with deficit	Preschool, primary school, junior high school, high school (ISTAT 2014/2015)
People with hearing impairments and compulsory education.	994,340	83.0% of the total number of people with hearing impairments, 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
People with hearing impairments and high school graduation.	165,324	13.8% of the total number of people with hearing impairments, 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
People with hearing impairments and a university degree.	38,336	3.2% of the total number of people with hearing impairments, 1,198,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Profoundly deaf people.	70,000	0.1% of national population, 60,600,000	Born deaf or became deaf before learning any language. Deafness is considered profound when the hearing loss is equal or higher than 90 decibels (EUD, 2014)
Profoundly deaf scholars in primary school	4,930	2.1% out of scholars with deficit (234,788)	Deafness is considered profound when the hearing loss is equal or more than 90 decibels (ISTAT, 2014-2015)
Deep deaf scholars in junior high school	4,226	1.8% out of scholars with deficit (234,788)	(ISTAT, 2013)

**Table 3** Deaf community

Features	Numbers	Percentage	Descriptions
Deaf registered by ENS	60,000		(ENS, 2010)
Deaf sign language users	40,000	60% out of profoundly deaf people are signers	(EUD, 2014)
Deaf signers with Deaf parents	7,000	10% out of profoundly deaf people	Carlo Eugeni-Unapeda

**Table 4** Deafblind

Features	Numbers	Percentage	Descriptions
Total Deafblind people	189,000	0.3% of national population	(ISTAT, 2013)
Nationwide: South and Islands	89,586	47.4% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Centre	40,450	21.4 % of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
North	59,157	31.3% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind people graduated from compulsory school	169,910	89.9% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind people graduated from high school	14,553	7.7% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind with university degree	4,536	2.4% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind without any other sensorial deficit	68,000	36.1% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind with motor deficit	98,000	51.7% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)
Deafblind with mental deficit	76,000	40.1% of 189,000	(ISTAT, 2013)

### 2.3 Deaf culture

As introduced in [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.1], Deaf Culture considers deafness as a cultural factor, and medical or scientific perspectives are not relevant in its definition. The relationships between Deaf people, their language, the shared knowledge about the history of Deaf people or their traditions and uses of life are considered important for the construction of Deaf identity. However, this construction is often in opposition with the hearing society. The boundaries of Deaf culture are both external and internal. The internal boundaries are built upon the sense of belonging to Deaf culture and sign language, while the external boundaries seem to be imposed by the inaccessibility to the social or economic spheres of the hearing society. The perspective of Deaf culture as a linguistic and cultural minority implies economic government support, just as the medical perspective requires economic facilities and medical services such as cochlear implants, speech therapies and supporting devices. Deaf culture is enhanced as it acts in opposition to the social and economic conditions of a minority being imposed by the hearing model of society. Moreover, Deaf culture is powered by a circular revitalization: generation by generation Deaf people define their identity through constructive processes. These processes claim an independent identity, rejecting the definitions which come from the point of view of the majority hearing culture. For the same reason, Deaf people generally do not appreciate the same politically correct definitions as *non-hearing* people. Indeed, the definition of people who lack something is automatically related to an intact hearing dominant culture. In this sense, the word Deaf, like the word Blind, defines a condition without implying a dominant reference model.

In relation to Deaf identity and culture, an important concept is *Deafhood* which has been introduced by Paddy Ladd in *Understanding Deaf Culture; In search of Deafhood* (2003). The suffix *-hood* in spoken English concerns the status or the quality of a previously mentioned noun (in this case the deaf population). No literal translation is possible in Italian, but, in a nutshell, the concept expresses the condition of being deliberately part of Deaf culture and community in contrast to the simply medical condition of deafness. Deafhood is a psychological and social process of increasing the awareness of deaf condition, in order not to consider it as a loss of something, but as part of an individual and collective identity. Another crucial concept in reframing deafness with respect to society is the notion of *Deaf Gain*. It is a framework proposed in 2009 by an article of H-Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray; even though the first mention was by Aar-



on Williamson, a deaf artist performer, who firstly wondered why it was that not a single doctor told him he was *gaining his deafness*, instead of *losing his hearing*. Indeed, the concept is conceived as a redefinition of *deafness* as a sensory and cognitive diversity which has the potential to contribute to the enrichment of humanity. In addition to the benefits to society, there is a direct benefit for Deaf people who use a visual based language. For example, researches have shown that Deaf people have a more well-developed peripheral vision, a greater ability to form quick mental images and better facial-recognition skills. New concepts such as *Deafhood* and *Deaf Gain* contribute in increasing the awareness of Deaf identity by reframing the traditional notion of ‘normalcy’.

The presence of cultural prevailing schema among the hearing population created barriers in the social inclusion of Deaf people, enhancing misconceptions and marginalization. However, the minority status of Deaf people is not common everywhere, indeed in some cultures there are no boundaries between hearing and Deaf people or between the two different cultures. Two examples are the story of a Mayan village in Yucatán and the story of Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. In the first case, the high number of deaf people yield deaf inhabitants to be well integrated in the community. Since hearing people knew sign language, no communication problems are considered as obstacles for the relationship between hearing and deaf people inside the village. It seems that hearing villagers are still used to communicate through Yucatec Maya Sign Language, even if the number of deaf inhabitants started to decrease. The second story concerns the case of Martha’s Vineyard island, which draw the linguistic researches attention to both the deaf and hearing islanders. Indeed, since the unusually high percentage of deaf people within the community, the Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) was able to thrive on the island from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1952.

In the island, deafness was a hereditary trait, so that Deaf people of the island did not consider themselves as impaired and they lived in a complete autonomy. In addition, they were deeply integrated among the remaining hearing island’s inhabitants. The sign language was used and taught to hearing children as early as their first years and signs were spread among hearing people even when no deaf people were present. MVSL started to decline when the population migrated to the mainland, and today no fluent signers are attested anymore. The last deaf person died in 1952, since then, very few elderly islanders were able to recall MVSL, when in the 1980s linguistic researchers started to examine the language in order to

save it. These examples, together with few others represents unusual cases of complete integration between hearing and deaf people, due to the absence of communication barriers. However, Deaf people are generally discriminated and marginalized by dominant hearing group. In post-industrial societies, Deaf people seem to share common life experiences. This is the reason why Deaf culture appears to overcome national boundaries by sharing a common ground of uses and universal perceptions. Some of them are: the types of relationships shared among Deaf people; the visual channel of sign languages; the concept of time which is not dependent on the production or working dimension of post-industrial societies; the way in which they are used to meeting each other. All these factors seem to be part of a specific sense of belonging to a broader Deaf culture.

An important part of Deaf identity is represented by name signs [LEXICON 3.1.2]. In our post-industrial societies, from birth it is common to recognize our identity in the name which is has been chosen for us. However, in other culture names are not unique and unchangeable, and in fact a person can have several names to identify different social roles or s/he can change names to mark different moments of life.

In Italy, in the past, something similar happened when a married woman changed her surname to take that of her husband. Furthermore, in post-industrial societies the specific meaning of the name is often lost, while in other cultures, names are chosen because they describe behavioural or physical characteristics. Something similar happens in Deaf cultures, where Deaf people, but also hearing people part of Deaf communities, are identified with one or more name signs. In Italy, as well, Deaf people share two names: one in spoken language and one name sign. These two names represent the double belonging to the hearing and Deaf spheres. Name signs in LIS can be arbitrary or descriptive. The latter are descriptions of specific physical characteristics, for example related to the hair or to particular facial traits. Someone with curly hair can be named with the sign denoting curly hair, as shown in the video below.

ANNA \_ CURLY-HAIR



These descriptions can also represent the specific attitude of the person designed with that name sign, as for example the smile, if the person is often cheerful (see video below), or they can refer to the job or to some specific abilities of the person who bears the name sign.

ANTONIA \_ SMILE



The arbitrary name signs, on the other hand, are not expressions of specific individual qualities, but are initialisations [LEXICON 2.2.2.1] or typical representations or translations of the name or surname in Italian. In the first case, initialized name signs use the first letter of the spoken Italian name or surname, as for example for the name Federico, the initialisation will be F. The letters are signed with the manual alphabet [LEXICON 2.2.2], which is a contact point between signs and words (see example below).

FEDERICO



In the second case, name signs are correlated to very common Italian names, as for example Pietro or Paolo. Very often these typical names come from the religious tradition and have fixed signs which correspond to them. Thus, Pietro will be signed as the sign for 'key', because according to the Christian tradition Saint Peter holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

PIETRO



Finally, a translated name sign is a literal translation of Italian names or surnames. For example, if the surname is *Scarpa* 'shoe', it is translated with the corresponding LIS sign.

LUCA\_SCARPA



Name signs can also be mixed, meaning that these classifications are not rigid and fixed, but that sometimes they can be used together. Name signs can be inherited and transmitted generation by generation, but this is not a rule. Furthermore, more than one name sign can coexist for the same person, for example the family name sign can be different from the name sign spread among the Deaf community, in this way a person can be identified with a specific sign from the family and with another specific sign from the community. Generally, there are three steps for changing a name sign: the first name sign is given by the family, the second is given by classmates or teachers and, thirdly, a name sign can change depending on the person's job. The ability to keep track of the name signs at different times and in different environments is a property of complex language systems.

The Deaf community also shares cultural and artistic types of cultural expressions in LIS. Poetry, theatre, rap performance, painting, cinema, cultural events and many other forms of artistic communication have been spreading and growing in the recent decades in Italy,

also thanks to contacts with other international Deaf artists. In Italy, festivals of Deaf theatre and poetry are organised yearly in different cities. These meetings represent important opportunities where Deaf artists can improve their skills and establish a social reputation in the Deaf community. However, thanks to scientific progresses and social media, the community mostly shares cultural performances through YouTube, Facebook pages, personal blogs, Instagram and other forms of social communication.

Sign language poetry started to appear in Italy in 1976, thanks to Joseph Castronovo, a Deaf American poet who was trying to trace his Sicilian origins. He married Graziella Anselmo and together they encouraged the spreading of sign language poetry, enhancing the visual channel of this special linguistic expression. In Palermo, they joined a theatre company, *Il Gabbiano* ('The Seagull') founded by Rosaria, Giuseppe, Maurizio and Fabio Giuranna in order to promote LIS. These four Deaf siblings, coming from a long Deaf family tradition, were emerging in the Deaf community thanks to their special artistic skills. Their performances were appreciated by the Deaf community and interest in them grew. In 1997, when the first International Festival of theatre, poetry and sketches in LIS was organised in Trieste, they won the first award for poetry. Other similar cultural events have been organised in Genoa in 2000, Naples in 2005 and Rome in 2017.

Rosaria Giuranna can be considered one of the first Deaf women poets, Rosaria and her brother Giuseppe Giuranna are some of the most well-known performers of Visual Vernacular, another form of artistic expression. Year by year, many other Deaf poets and performers started to run the social scene: one of the first poets was Renato Pigliacampo, who was specialized in written Italian poems, although being a postlingual Deaf. Some of the contemporary Italian Deaf poets who compose in LIS are: Lucia Daniele, Valentina Bani, Nicola Della Maggiora, Laura di Gioia, and Chiara Di Monte.

Topics of poetry are often linked to the condition of being Deaf in a hearing society, they can be metaphors or expressions of personal experiences, reinterpretations of historical events, or short symbolic fantastic narrations. Visual perceptions are prominent and unusual new linguistic forms are created in emphasizing the force of communication by expanding the boundaries of every sign. Poetry testifies a specific linguistic awareness: the ability to catch the relationship between expressive forms and meanings and the straightforward capability to create rhythmic sequences, symmetries, rhymes, repetitions, assonances and text-internal references. In a poetic performance, the linguistic form is valued as well, although the poet may not neces-

sarily be aware of all the choices made. The poetic language seems to disobey the common rules of the grammar, indeed poets are those who use language in unusual ways, finding new formal and stylistic solutions. Language is folded to the poetic intentions in order to support and enhance the different layers of meaning. Among others, one of the properties of a poetic text is repetition. This stylistic strategy can be used in different linguistic layers of LIS: at a phonological layer by repeating the same configurations, movements or orientations of signs, at a morphological level by repeating the same signs, and at a syntactic level by repeating the sentences with or without variations of manual and non-manual features. Repetition makes the interpretation of content easier and enhances the relevance of the message. Another recurrent property of sign language poetry is the symmetry in signing. This is a stylistic technique which reinforces visual patterns and the structural order of the signs, moreover, it makes signs balanced and more fluent.

A common scheme of poetry reflects a circular structure, like some refrains in spoken songs, where repetition and symmetric patterns create a visual melody comparable to the musicality of some oral forms of poetry. Contrary to common misconceptions, even sign language has rhythm. Rhythm is not only transmitted through acoustic sounds, in fact, visual rhythm is built upon repetition of signs, duration and movements. The uses of these factors produce different types of emphasis, for example accelerations or downturns affect the rhythm of signing.

Iconicity is a further property of languages: in spoken languages, onomatopoeic sounds are iconic because they reproduce real sounds by codifying them into words, such as the verb ‘mooring’ which reproduces the sound of a cow. Sign languages also use iconicity, but, since the communication channel in sign language is visual, they use visual iconicity. In poetry, iconicity supports the artistic expression of signs. Generally, it is reflected by the choice of handshapes, but movements, orientations, locations and non-manual features can emphasize iconicity as well.

The collection *Sette poesie in LIS* (‘Seven poems in LIS’) is one of the first examples of poetry which was published and disseminated by means of CD-ROM. The project was realised by Rosaria and Giuseppe Giuranna. In the CD, one of the poems, *Orologio* (‘Clock’), is about the passing of time and the individual perception of the temporal dimension. Time is affected by meetings with people who can break the monotony of daily life. Different rhythms accompany different time perceptions, slow repetition and the cyclicity of signs emphasise for example the boredom of life, while a sudden change

in the speed of signing shows an emotional break in the circular perception of time. In this way, linguistic forms and content overlap giving back the visual effect of the passing of time.

Together with repetition and iconicity, semantic indeterminacy is another characteristic property of poetry. This kind of semantic vagueness allows the extension of interpretations and meaning of the poems over its formal and semantic boundaries. A good example of semantic indeterminacy arises in the poetry of Lucia Daniele: *Matita* ('Pencil'). Since this poetry is less narrative than *Orologio*, more of the semantic interpretation is left up to the audience. *Matita* is a metaphor for life, its gentle track can be cancelled, and the pencil is worn like the life of human being which is used right to the end. On this vein, the poetry could be interpreted as a description of an entire human life, from birth to death. The repetition of the handshape 1, the same used for person, is not accidental and visually enhances the metaphor. However, the semantic vagueness of this poetry allows other level of interpretations, for example, it is possible to read the necessity of facing the hardships of life, of not giving up to obstacles, and, as a pencil can be sharp, life can also be made sharp by pains. All these interpretations are possible, because the use of classifiers and role shift make the reading broader and stratified.

Since poems in LIS cannot be written (yet), the reproduction of poetry are performative moments for the artists. Indeed, poetry and theatre are close in this genre and require not only a physical, but also a deep mental presence and concentration from the poet. Based on the performative nature of sign language poetry, each reproduction is unique and unrepeatable.

Other genres of artistic performances exist, such as Visual Vernacular, ABC stories and creative storytelling. *Visual Vernacular* (VV) is an artistic genre which is related to cinematographic effects. Although it has a high use of iconicity, contrary to common misconceptions, it is not universally understandable. Visual Vernacular uses sign language mixed with visual techniques based on classifiers and role shifts. In Italy, Giuseppe Giuranna is an internationally known VV performer. In his videos, fragments of several of his performances make clear the deep iconic nature of these kind of cultural expression, which requires a perfect ability in assembling the scenes and taking into account the rhythms, time sequences, points of view and foci. In Italy, another famous national Visual Vernacular performer is Gabriele Caia.

ABC stories are performances in signs which follow a regular pattern given by the order of the hand alphabet. Because of their nature, they represent a contact point between spoken languages (they use

alphabetic letters) and sign languages (they use the hands in order to produce letters). Gabriele Caia and many other Deaf artists, as the deaf blogger Lorenzo Laudo, have played with ABC stories. An example by Lorenzo Laudo is the ABC story *Buongiorno?* ('Good morning?').

Theatre companies and performers represent an important piece of artistic forms and expressions within the Deaf culture. It is impossible to establish when the first theatre company in sign language was founded in Italy. Probably, in the first decades of 1900 a group of Deaf people enjoyed performing shows and sketches in the local clubs of their cities. No written documents have been found and the unique performances are transmitted via the memories of old signers.

The list below shows some theatre companies playing at international and national level, which participated at the first Deaf Festival (Trieste, October 30 - November 2, 1997).

The theatre company of Mime *Senza Parole* ('Without Words'): it was founded in Milan by Sergio Cattivalli, born to Deaf parents. After a break, in 1979 the leadership was assumed by the director Antonio de Pieri. The proposed topics are original and cross several genres, such as cabaret, drama and comedy, all of them turning around Deaf culture. Other shows are reinterpretations of famous masterpieces. The company plays in Italy, but also in other countries, such as Spain, Denmark, USA, Japan.

The theatre company *Il Ciclope* ('The Cyclops') was founded in Palermo by a group of Deaf people in 1976. It performs musicals with LIS songs, sketches, poems concerning Deaf culture and community, daily life, and typical Deaf experiences in the hearing society are performed as well. The company is open to Deaf and hearing players. Its tours are usually organised across Italy, but also France, Spain and Japan.

The theatre company *Laboratorio Zero* ('Zero Laboratory') was founded in Rome by Ginetta Rosato, a Deaf director. Initially the name of the Company was *La Mandragola* ('The Mandrake'), and in 1986 it was changed in the current one. Since 1993 the company started to perform only reinterpretations of famous comedies and it has performed in several Italian cities.

The theatre company *Padre Luigi Aiello* ('Father Luigi Aiello') is based in Molfetta-Bari and was founded in 1985 by Domenico Binetti and other friends. The group plays cabaret and comedies, which are represented using signs and gestures. This accessibility is appreciated by the local and national schools, where the company played several shows.

The theatre company *Teatro del Sole* ('Theatre of the Sun') was founded in Catania and directed by Antonio D'Urso. Initially, the com-

pany was composed of both hearing and Deaf players. Since 1992, it has only featured Deaf actors.

The theatre company *Maschera Viva* ('Live Mask') operates in Turin and it is run only by Deaf players. The shows are represented in sign language and are related to scenes of Deaf daily life. Lucia Daniele used to perform with the company. The group has performed in several Italian cities.

In Milan, the association *Orgoglio Sordo* ('Deaf Pride') was founded in 1983. The main goal of the group is to spread knowledge about Deaf culture and LIS among hearing and deaf people. In 1995, it organised a short linguistic and poetic course about sign language run by Clayton Valli, a famous Deaf American poet. The course was one of the first chances to learn and develop poetic techniques. The group performs in several Italian cities with poetry and songs.

The group *Mimico Trentino* ('Trentino Mime') was founded in Trento thanks to the support of the City of Trento and the local ENS. The project was initially run by Enzo Maria Caserta, who passed away in 1997. It proposes funny sketches and shows about Deaf culture at a national level.

The theatre company *Il Gabbiano* ('The Seagull') was founded in 1997 by the Giuranna siblings and performs poems and songs in LIS. It won the First Deaf Festival in Trieste with the poem *Grazie* ('Thanks').

The *Arte&Mani* ('Art&Hands') - *Deaf Italy Onlus* was established in Rome in 2011 together with the experimental company *Teatro Sordo Lis* ('Deaf LIS Theatre'). The group is composed by hearing and deaf actors who work together to create accessible performances for both hearing and deaf audience.

Theatre companies and artistic performances contribute in disseminating LIS at national and international levels, however, the increasing interest for sign language and Deaf culture in Italy is also fostered through the presence of new private and public associations which are promoting LIS among hearing people, fighting against the stereotypes for a better knowledge of the Deaf universe. Across Italy, beside the presence of ENS, other associations work for the promotion of LIS. Examples of the growing interest are provided by the rising numbers of subscriptions to LIS courses at different levels [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.3].

The social empowerment and life changing effects on Deaf people are also testified by the recent opening of new public places, such as bars and pubs run by Deaf people or with Deaf people. In Italy, the first and most important place totally run by young Deaf people is the *Senza Nome* bar ('Without Name') opened in Bologna, in Via Bel-



vedere, 11/B. The space was founded by Alfonso Marrazzo and Sara Longhi and represents a contact point for hearing and Deaf people. The main goal is to create opportunities for mutual relationships. It is a welcoming place where boundaries break down, leaving room for daily inclusion experiences. The space is also a frequent promoter of cultural and artistic events, such as book presentations, cultural and linguistic discussions, and workshops and courses of different kinds. Indeed, many of the Deaf people who work there come from artistic backgrounds, and the bar has been opened with the precise purpose to foster LIS through public artistic performances or installations.

Another central place for Deaf culture is *L'Altro Spazio* ('The Other Space') opened in Bologna (in via Nazario Sauro, 24/F) after the success of the *Senza Nome* bar and supported by the association *Farm*. Unlike *Senza Nome*, *L'Altro Spazio* has a broader vocation, and is designed as a contact space for people with various disabilities. It fights against the stereotype of disability as a lack of something. The idea came from the sisters Nunzia and Santa Vannuccini together with Jasha Blume.

All these experiences are examples of the growing awareness of Deaf people concerning their rights and their changed social status. The new Deaf generations want to review welfarism and the old mentality toward deafness, testifying their proactivity and their right to be independent. The success of these spaces cannot be justified just as fashions or social tendencies, they seem rather to be consequences of a renewed awareness conception of social diversities which describe a new relational model of society. These examples are parts of the concept of *Deaf Gain*, which suggests to counter the predominant schema of being Deaf as a loss by reframing deafness as an opportunity for human enrichment.

The spreading of this changed vision of deafness and the growing of Deaf identity and culture can also be attributed to the increase of national and international events and festivals organised by the Deaf community in the last decades. One of the most important events for the Deaf community is *CineDeaf*, the Italian Festival of Deaf Cinema. It was started in Rome in 2012 thanks to the support of the *Ente Nazionale Sordi* ('National Deaf Institute'), and has had four editions so far (2013, 2015, 2017). The team who organised this international Festival is composed of both hearing and Deaf people. Their idea is to work together to promote knowledge and organise meetings between the traditional cinema circles and the Deaf artists and directors. The Festival wants to create dialogic spaces where perspectives and different points of view can be exchanged and shared. Furthermore, the project's goal is to find new paths and new expressive lan-

guages of communication in order to renew and enrich traditional experiences. It also aims at spreading and disseminating new independent talents, and even young talents are involved through the participation of schools. Culturally, the CineDeaf represents an important network with other foreign film projects across the world and it is a great opportunity to meet other Deaf communities.

As already mentioned in the previous section, Deaf theatre is generally celebrated across Italian cities and represents an important opportunity to experience international Deaf cultures and to share experiences between Deaf and hearing people from different parts of the world. The First Theatre Festival was organised in Trieste (1997), and others were based in Genoa (2000), Naples (2005), and the last was run in Rome (2017).

Other representative occasion related to the international Deaf community are: i) the *World Deaf Day* (WDD), which is celebrated every year in the last week of September to direct the attention of the media, politicians and authorities towards the achievements of Deaf people, as well as the hearing communities. People are also encouraged to celebrate this day to expand new technologies and improve the opportunities to change their lifestyle in society. (ii) The *Summer* and *Winter Deaflympics* (Olympic games for deaf and hard of hearing people). The first game, known as the *International Silent Games*, were held in 1924 in Paris by the *French Sport Deaf Federation* involving athletes from nine countries, in order to prove that deaf people were not inferior, a common misconception at that time. Today, *Deaflympics* is mostly organised by the *International Committee of Sport for Deaf* (ICSD) and involves 113 memberships. Another very important event spread among the Deaf community is the *Deaf Champion League* (DCL). Since the first competition in 2008 based in London, DCL is played every year in a different city. Today DCL includes 29 different countries. Not only sport represents an important occasion for sharing and fostering Deaf identity around world, but also art, culture, and fashion, which are crucial points in the *DeafNation World Expo* (DNWE). The first DWE was held in Las Vegas from 19 to 22 July 2010, the idea of a World Expo comes from the *DeafNation*, a social media company co-founded in 2003 by the brothers Joel and Jed Barish. The DNWE was established in order to create an opportunity for Deaf people around the world to meet and exchange life experiences. A known event linked to the DWE and spread among Deaf national and international communities is *Miss & Mister Deaf International* (MMDI). The first MMDI pageant was established in 2010, thanks to the idea of Ms. Bonita Ann Leek. Indeed, in 2010, the pageant, which before 2010 was local, received the opportunity to be incorporated in the *DeafNation World Expo*, acquiring an

international visibility. Since then, seven editions have been organised in various cities across the world. However, the beauty pageant has also a national version, *Miss & Mister Deaf Italy*, held in Italy since the first edition in 2011. The pageant is organised by *Alphabet Onlus* in order to raise the profile of Deaf people across Italy, but the Onlus also supports Deaf families with limited means and promotes the development of technological tools for deaf people.

These types of events are part of the sense of belonging to the same community, and they come from the will to share experiences and integrate Deaf conditions among society. Internationality is a way to recognize similarities over differences and becomes stronger in shared new projects and new ideas.

## 2.4 Deaf education

As introduced in [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1], in the past, the education of deaf children was managed through various methods, but nonetheless there were two main tendencies: a spoken-oriented and a sign-oriented method. Both theories were improved during the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the first one by Samuel Heinicke (1729-1790) and the second one by the Abbé De l'Épée (1712-1789). Heinicke was born on a farm in Germany, and after an experience in the military he worked as private tutor. Around 1754, he taught a deaf boy to write with great success, following the spoken-oriented book by Amman. In 1768, he took on another deaf boy and taught him how to speak and write with brilliant results. In 1778, Heinicke opened a school for the deaf in Leipzig. His method is defined oralist because he claimed that spoken language is the starting point for thoughts, and the written form is simply a consequence of it. This was the reason why he avoided teaching the written language first. Heinicke's use of signs is unclear, but it is most likely that he did not reject their use, employing natural signs and the manual alphabet as a means in supporting his spoken-oriented system.

A completely different educational model was promoted by the Abbé De l'Épée, who was born in Versailles to a wealthy family. He came upon twin deaf sisters, who had just lost their spiritual leader, and, being moved to pity, he decided to take care of their instruction. In a short time, thanks to his success, he took on other deaf pupils. In 1760, he founded the *Institut National des Jeunes Sourds* in Paris. Initially, he developed his own method, using the natural signs of deaf people in Paris as the primary means of communication. Increasing the number of his students, De l'Épée began to be well-known in oth-

er countries. Unlikely his predecessors, he was more than happy to spread his methodology at an international level, welcoming foreign teachers who were interested in his work.

According to these ideal principles, in 1776 he published a book, later improved and republished in 1784, where he expounded the theory and practice of his method. His primary goal was not to teach speaking and writing to his pupils, but to enrich them through intellectual and spiritual education. In order to pursue this aim, he found sign communication to be the most efficient method. De l'Épée added the *signes méthodiques* to the *langue de signe naturel* in an attempt to adapt French sign language to the grammar of spoken French [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1]. He also used to consider fingerspelling as a methodological tool, and the verbs taught were followed by *methodological signs* which marked the tense and the aspect of the verb. Furthermore, he considered lip-reading hard to teach, but also very useful for deaf people to acquire the spoken language.

The spreading of this sign-oriented method provoked attacks from the men who supported the opposite educational theories, such as Heinicke and Pereire. They declared that De l'Épée's method was useless and dangerous for the learning purposes of deaf people. Although a commission analysed his method and claimed that it was valid, Heinicke remained doubtful and sceptic. De L'Épée died in 1789, and Ambroise Sicard (1742-1822) became the director of the *National Institute*. In 1818, he completed and published the dictionary begun by De L'Épée *Theorie de Signes*, where, for the first time, signs were organised by a criterion of classes of idea and not alphabetically. Sicard improved the method of his predecessor, the final purpose of teaching was for him to allow students to be able to express their own thoughts. He abandoned De L'Épée's aim to teach signed French, in favour of a bilingual approach. Finally, Roch Ambroise Bebian (1789-1839), Sicard's successor, refined his method and produced a manual for teaching the French language through the use of the sign language. The French method, improved by these additional revisions, was widely spread throughout Europe and across the ocean as well.

One of the most fruitful heirs of these developments was Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787-1851), an American reverend interested in deaf educational methods [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1]. In 1816, thanks to an invitation from Sicard, he visited the Institute for the deaf in Paris, and after some months he got a permit to go back to America with Laurent Clerc, a brilliant deaf teacher of the Institute. In 1817, at Hartford, in Connecticut, Gallaudet and Clerc opened the first school for deaf students: the *American School for Deaf* (ASD).

French Sign Language was introduced in the new school and this is the reason why American Sign Language (ASL) is so similar to French Sign Language (LSF).



**Figure 2** The deaf Institutes in Italy.

<http://www.istc.cnr.it/mostralis/pannello10.htm>

In Italy, the first school for the deaf was opened in Rome in 1784 by the Abbot Tommaso Silvestri (1744-1789). Although he was trained for six months by De L'Épée, he chose a spoken-oriented method. He was convinced that only words had the power to distinguish men from beasts. The oral method was used until 1841, when the school was converted to signs.

As mentioned in the Historical Background [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1], Padre Giovan Battista Assarotti is considered the real father of the sign-oriented method in Italy. In his school in Genoa, he adopted the visual-gestural method spread by Sicard. Assarotti founded his Institute in 1805, and his motto was *The best method is to have no method!* He created his own method, but unfortunately it has been lost because he never produced any kind of written documentation. Probably, thanks to the books published by De l'Épée and Sicard, the French signs were imported to Genoa, influencing the Italian signs, but no proof of this contamination exists.

In the same vein as Assarotti, the priest Tommaso Pendola founded the *Royal Tuscan Institute for Deaf-mutes* in the 1828 in Siena, financed by Leopold II of Tuscany. Deaf students from the whole region were welcomed and trained in order to be employed in professional activities. However, in 1871 the educational system was changed and converted to an oral method.

In 1849 (until 1950), in Bologna, Don Giuseppe Gualandi and his brother Don Cesare Gualandi founded an Institute for Deaf children, with the purpose of educating and guarantee a proper catholic instruction for their deaf students. Cesare and Giuseppe Gualandi visited many specialized centres around Italy in order to document the numerous experiences and apply the best methodology. Even if the acquisition of the spoken language remained the primary aim of the brothers, their methodology was tailored to each single student, everyone being considered as an individual case. The attempt was to avoid the overrule of a unique and universal top-down method to be applied in all situations, and to create a bottom-up method, as flexible and adaptive as a *dress to cut or extend depending on the real cases*. However, this individual education required an open-minded comparison with other schools and deaf Institutions, in order to start a national dialogue and create a playing field between the different approaches. In the same vein, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1872 in Siena the magazine *L'educazione dei Sordomuti* (The education of Deaf-Mutes) was created with the purpose of connecting specialized teachers to exchange opinions and solve common problems.

Meanwhile, in 1841, pope Gregory XVI sent the new directors of the Roman Institute for the deaf (the one funded by the Abbot Silvestri) to learn Padre Assarotti's methodology. From that moment on, the oral method of the Roman Institute was changed, following the Assarotti's approach based on signs and fingerspelling. However, this new input lasted only 20 years, and in 1865 Padre Muti e Madre Kuntz (director of the opened female section) restored the spoken-oriented education. After the Italian Unification, the Institute passed under the authority of the Ministry of Public Instruction, and in 1889 was moved to via Nomentana 54, where it can still be found today.

Generally, during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, signs were mostly used in the Deaf Institutes, or at least admitted as a transitional phase to proceed with an oral/written type of education. In that period, the emphasis was on learning and the linguistic developments of deaf children appeared to be valuable. However, towards the end of the century, this mixed approach changed in favour of a purely oralist method. The reason for this important turning point can be found in the fact that most of the Institutes concentrated in the northern part of Italy, precisely in the Lombardo-Veneto Kingdom. This area, being part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was very much influenced by the nearby Germanic culture. The progress in biology, medicine and linguistics opened new questions on educational discussions and the oral methodology was considered part of this progress. Another relevant factor was the Unification of Italy

in 1861, accompanied by the pressure to homogenize all local differences. Such processes led to the suppression of cultural and linguistic minorities, in favour of one unique national culture and language. In the same spirit, educators had been considering the relevance of training students to the use of the spoken language, used by the majority of the Italian population.

The first Congress of educator took place in Siena in 1873 and concluded that signs had to be considered as a middle phase until the Deaf students had acquired sufficient control of the oral language. Some years later, the Universal Congress in Paris (1878) claimed that the best way to include Deaf people in the hearing society was articulatory-oriented, namely based on lip-reading. However, a crucial point in the history of signs was the International Congress of Milan (6-11 September 1880) chaired by the Abbot Giulio Tarra, a strong supporter of oralism [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1]. The participants invited at the Congress supported the superiority of the oral method, except for the convinced opposition of Thomas Gallaudet, who were in favour of a mixed method. Indeed, at the end of the Congress, a vast majority voted for the purely oral system as the preferred one and signs were banished because they were considered to be damaging the acquisition of words. After the Congress, all European Deaf schools became oralist, except for the United States where signs-oriented methodologies and oralistic approaches continued to coexist. Neither the opinions nor the requests of Deaf people were considered during the Congress of Milan, and in this situation several associations and friendly societies were founded by Deaf people in different Italian cities, such as Milan (1874), Turin (1880), Genoa (1884) and Siena (1890). These types of societies represent the first social representational forms of the Deaf community and will lead to the development of the national body for the representation of Deaf people: ENS.

In 1911, the *First International Congress of deaf-mutes* took place in Rome, in order to demand improvements in the educational system, in the workplace and in all spheres of society. Ten years later, the *Second International Congress* in Rome demanded the extension of the legal recognition of compulsory schooling to all deaf-mutes. Meanwhile, in 1920 with the support of Giuseppe Enrico Prestini the *Federazione Italiana delle Associazioni fra I Sordomuti* (FIAS, Italian Federation of Associations among Deaf-mutes) was established during the *First Meeting of Italian Deaf people*. Thanks to the pushing actions of FIAS, in 1923 the Gentile Reform apply the extension of the mandatory school to deaf children. Since its unofficial establishment in 1932 as the *Deaf of Padua* managed by Antonio Magarotto until the official recognition with the Law no. 889/1942, ENS fos-

tered and promoted rights and equal opportunities for Deaf people. The increased awareness among the Deaf community during this period led to reopen the debate about public schools with equal opportunities for all children [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1].

In the following decades, during the years 1949-1954, special schools and differentiated classrooms were created in order to grant education to all people with impairments. However, the level of illiteracy among deaf was still high in the census of 1995. 1962 was the year in which compulsory schooling was extended to middle school.

Finally, after many discussions and disagreements, the situation changed with the Law no. 517/1977 which stated the possibility for the families of deaf children to make a choice: they could continue to attend classes at the special schools for the deaf or they could decide to send their deaf children to public schools receiving re-educational moments offered by public or private services.

Since then, doctors rather than educators were engaged in solving the problem of language acquisition and oral skills of deaf children. In fact, with the Law no. 833/1978 the local agencies set up a new *National Health Service* and the local health center became responsible for the rehabilitation of subjects affected by any kind of impairments.

Although the Law no. 517/1977 represents a crucial change in the educational methods for the deaf, the situation during the 1980s was chaotic and vague, most of the families opted for the public hearing schools, because they considered the public schools superior to the special schools, but the teachers received no training on the most appropriate educational methodology for deaf students. Furthermore, very few assistants were assigned to the classes with deaf students, and these assistants also frequently lacked specific competencies about deafness. At the time, there was not enough knowledge about the linguistic issues of deaf children, in particular, the fact that they should have better mastered the spoken language was ignored. The interpreters were not very widely spread, and in addition, most of the deaf students have been raised with an oralist-oriented education, without any language acquired spontaneously (as first languages are). The paradox was that the deaf students who were often left alone in the classroom, without the support of specialized support teachers or educators, were unable to learn either the Italian language or signs.

A crucial step toward the improvement of the educational conditions for deaf scholars was reached with the Article no. 13 of the Law no. 104/1992 which established the presence of support teachers and individual communication assistants for people with physical or sensory impairments. These professional profiles were already



mentioned within the Law no. 616/1977, however only with the Law no. 104/1992 their presence became mandatory. The individual assistant has the function to facilitate and support the communicative relationships of the deaf student with teachers and other scholars, while the support teacher profile has been introduced to facilitate the educational programs and to enhance the growing of scholars. The presence of these professional profiles in the schools had improved the educational programs.

One of the contemporary educational models is the bimodal bilingualism program, which consists in training deaf scholars by fostering the development of both communication channels (speech and signs). The Bimodal-bilingualism describes the knowledge of languages based on different channels, for example the vocal-auditory channel of spoken languages and the visual-gestural channel of sign languages. In 1989, the first experiment was conducted at the National Deaf Institute in Rome, starting with a class in the elementary school. Later, the experiment was applied to the kindergarten and then also opened up to hearing children. In 1994, a similar experiment took place in Cossato (a small town in Piemonte) in a public Nursery School. Although in the school there was no specific expertise in LIS, the parents of three deaf children decided to enrol their infants anyway. The program was strongly supported by the teachers and by a group of speech therapists who together wrote the educational plan and methodology. Another interesting experiment started in 2006 at the Institute Santini in Noventa Padovana (a town near Padova, in Veneto), and finally in 2008 in Milan a new program was initiated, entirely sponsored by local public institutions and coordinated by ENS.

Recently, the project *MoSSSiS* (Model of integrated special school services for Deaf individuals) was presented to the Ministry of Education by the *AIES* (Italian Association of Educators of Deaf Children) which stated a national educational plan for integrating Deaf and hearing children [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]. One of the purposes of the project was to increase and support the knowledges of teachers and educators of Deaf children and to promote bilingual programs. The project encouraged an important lifelong learning attitude in order to prevent the situation of Deaf adults returning to illiteracy.

Nowadays, in Italy, the visibility of bilingual programs is rising, especially into the Deaf community and an increasing number of deaf children are included in bilingual bimodal educational programs. Furthermore, today sign language is taught as a communication form in other educational environment, even to hearing children who show spoken language impairments and to children with other types of

physical and/or intellectual disabilities, among other Down's Syndrome (Trisomy 21), Landau-Kleffner Syndrome, and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

New bilingual educational programs have been also submitted within the Decree Law no. 302, which was approved by the Senate Chamber on October 2017. The Decree Law no. 302 represents a further attempt, after many others failed, to official recognize LIS and to promote the social inclusion of Deaf and Deafblind people. However, so far it remains still not discussed by the Chamber of Deputies [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2].

The absence of national language planning officially approved by the Italian Government and the lack of funds for supporting services and tools, in order to improve the integration of deaf students, represent serious obstacles to the final disclosure of LIS in educational and training environments.

### Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in this chapter are based on the references below. The video clips exemplifying the linguistic data have been produced by a native signers grown in the northern part of Italy one of them belongs to a younger generation of signers.

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