
3 Status

Summary 3.1 Current legislation. – 3.2 Language policy. – 3.3 Language attitudes.

LIS has still not been recognized as a minority language by political institutions. However, hospitals, courthouses, notaries, schools, and other public institutions make reference to this language requiring its use in public and private situations. They thus recognize its importance and status by requiring the presence of interpreters or communication assistants. This contradictory situation creates a gap between the social condition (status) of LIS, supported by local and national associations, and its official recognition.

The present chapter addresses the following topics: ongoing issues about the current legislation on LIS [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.1]; specific language policies [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]; and language attitudes, namely the opinions concerning the status of LIS at the population level [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.3].

3.1 Current legislation

In Italy, the social attitude toward LIS has changed in the past thirty years. In the 1980s, Deaf people still limited their use of signs to closed environments. Indeed, the domain of LIS was spread in unofficial occasions, like daily life experiences. Signs barely appeared in

classroom and in public occasions: the consequences were the marginalization of Deaf signers from public contexts, as conferences or public lectures. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about this deficit and common misconception, like the fact that Deaf people are also mutes, contributed to the exclusion of Deaf signers from society (for further information, see [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.3]).

At the European level, the perceptions and conceptions about acoustic deficit started to change politically in the last decades thanks to the *Rights of people with hearing impairments* Statement promoted by the *United Nations Educational Scientific And Cultural Organisation* (UNESCO) on 5 July 1971, and by the first document of the *World Health Organisation* (WHO), called ICIDH (*International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicap*), spread in 1980. These two documents introduced a new definition of deficit, namely, the individual status of a person was no longer associated with his/her physical conditions only, but it started to be also considered at the social and relational level. In particular, the document distinguished between impairment, disability, and handicap. Impairment was defined as the lack or the anomaly of a psychological, physiologic, or anatomic function. Disability was defined as limitations to the capacity to undertake typical human activities, limitations which are consequential to the impairment. Finally, handicap was defined as a disadvantageous condition due to an impairment or a disability limiting the subject with respect to age, gender and socio-cultural factor. Many years later, the UNESCO's *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (June 7-10, 1994) took place in Spain. It enhanced the necessity that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional or linguistic conditions. Simultaneously to the increasing of care about inclusive educational programs and conceptual redefinitions of disabilities, linguistic issues related to the recognition of sign languages drew the attention of various political institution and organisations. The establishment of the *World Congresses of World Federation of the Deaf* (WFD) played a fundamental international role in ensuring equal rights for deaf people around the world. The WFD was established in Rome on September 23, 1951. To date, every four years the WFD organised a World Congress about deaf-related topics to advance the human rights and promote sign languages worldwide. Since 1958, the WFD has a consultative status in the UNESCO. Thanks to this role, *Resolutions* promoted in the Congresses affected the international debate about Deaf people conditions. In collaboration with WFD, the promotion of *European Parliament Resolutions on Sign Languages for Deaf*

People (June 17, 1988) and *on Sign Languages* (November 18, 1988) represented crucial steps toward the achievement of the awareness about Deaf rights and identity, fostering the official recognition of sign languages. Both *Resolutions* also called upon member states to ensure European funding programs in the field of education and employment, including training of sign language tutors and interpreters. Later on, the European Council in Strasburg drew the *European Charter for Regional and Minority languages* (November 5, 1992) for the protection and promotion of languages used by traditional minorities. To date, many years after the proclamation of the *European Charter*, the Law (482/1999) for preserving the status of minority languages has been approved in Italy granting every year special funds to support dialects and other linguistic minorities. However, the concept of minority language is strictly related to the existence of communities using the language in a specific territory. Therefore, LIS is not included among linguistic minorities because it is not associated to a specific local territory, rather it is spread all over the country.

In 2006, the United Nations (UN) promoted the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* which represented a fundamental point towards the achievement of equal opportunities for people with deficits in that it granted them the fundamental human rights and freedom. The general principles of the Convention are: i) respect for inner dignity, individual autonomy and personal independence of people, ii) non-discrimination, iii) full participation and inclusion into society, iv) respect for the differences and in particular for people with deficit as part of human differences, v) equal opportunities, vi) accessibility, vii) equal opportunities between men and women, and viii) respect for the developing of the capacity in people with disabilities who have not yet come of age. The Convention also includes specific dispositions concerning the protection of deaf people, supporting the importance of the recognition of their linguistic and cultural identity. After the promulgation of the Convention, the Italian Parliament opened an internal discussion in 2009. The Parliament, through the Law no. 18 (March 3, 2009) authorized the ratification of the Convention and, finally, on June 14, 2009 the Convention entered into force. The approval of the Convention forced the Italian legislator to promote an internal legislation according to the principles of the law. Nonetheless, this law made no mention to LIS. In fact, only in March 2011, a special committee of the Italian Parliament proposed the *Deaf People's Rights and Recognition of Italian Sign Language* (no. 37/S) bill for the recognition of LIS. The bill was discussed and approved by the Senate Chamber, but the discussion was never concluded. The bill considers deafness from two different perspectives:

pathological, which describes deafness simply as an auditory deficit, and *sociocultural* which perceives deafness as a cultural and socio-linguistic condition. Although the bill recognized the linguistic status of LIS, it still did not include LIS among other minority languages. The exclusion of the sign language from the status of minority languages could lead to serious consequences, especially concerning the financial funding necessary for language policy and planning [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]. Indeed, the bill established that all funding had to be locally found, and that the State Administration was not responsible for it. Despite the indifference of some political institutions at the national level, the bill represented an important step towards achieving greater awareness of the essential needs of the Italian Deaf Community.

It is important to mention that not all deaf people are signers and support the recognition of LIS. Many deaf people support the acquisition of spoken Italian fighting against the spread of signs. In Italy, one of the main opposing groups to sign language is the association FIADDA [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]. Among others, a reason for their opposition is the fear of a further marginalization of Deaf people, caused by the spread of the sign language. The consequences of this split among deaf people contribute to slow down the process of the recognition of LIS.

After further unsuccessful attempts, in October 2017 the Senate Chamber approved the Decree Law no. 302 (*Legge quadro sui diritti di cittadinanza delle persone sorde, e con disabilità uditiva in genere e sordocieche*) and others (no. 1019; no. 1151, no. 1789; no. 1907), which includes dispositions regarding: i) the importance of removing communication barriers, ii) the official recognition of LIS and tactile Italian Sign Language (LISt), and iii) the promotion of the social inclusion of deaf and deafblind people. Furthermore, the Decree Law declares the freedom to choose the best channel of communication (spoken or signed), promoting social integration in schools, universities, working environments and health services. It also grants accessibility to historical, artistic and cultural heritage and political participation. Moreover, the Draft Law establishes a unique national register for interpreters of LIS and LISt, since today this professional rule is still locally coordinated. However, like the previous Drafts, the effort to monitor the implementation of the Law, and to penalize its violations, is assigned to local administrations and it does not include additional expenses for the national Government. The consequence is that services are not granted to people with deficit, since very often local administrations are not able to fund projects of inclusions.

The Decree Law reopened a heated discussion among members of the Deaf community and their opponents, which has been ongoing on social media and in public spaces. Once again, the final decision depends on the Chamber of Deputies, which has not dealt with the issue yet.

Although LIS has not been officially recognized yet, it is unofficially supported by local and national institutions. For example, LIS courses are often directly cosponsored by local administrations, and LIS interpretation is currently provided in court cases, where Deaf people are involved. Some funding comes from the budgets designated for local welfare, health or educational services. However, none of this can be considered as a systematic language planning [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]. Furthermore, some Italian regions have already locally recognized LIS supporting its dissemination in order to grant the free expression of identity and equal rights to Deaf people. So far, the regions which have officially promoted the recognition of LIS are: i) Valle d'Aosta (Resolution: *'Iniziativa per un intervento legislativo per il riconoscimento ufficiale della Lingua dei segni'* approved on November 9, 2006), ii) Calabria (no. 46, approved on November 23, 2007), iii) Sicilia (Regional Law no. 23, November 4, 2011), iv) Piemonte (Draft Law no. 86, October 29, 2010 and approved on July 24, 2012), v) Campania (Regional Draft Law no. 21/2012), vi) Abruzzo (Regional Law no. 17, March 17, 2014), vii) Lazio (Regional Law no. 6, May 28, 2015), viii) Lombardia (Regional Law no. 20, August 5, 2016), ix) Basilicata (Regional Law no. 30, November 20, 2017), x) Veneto (Regional Draft Law no. 220, February 1, 2017) unanimously approved on February 15, 2018.

3.2 Language policy

The national political situation is chaotic and not many sources exist in order to trace back the historical stratifications of legislative proposals and Draft Laws which have had no effect.

The bill (no. 37/S) proposed in March 2011 included an explicit reference to the use of LIS in public and private context. Specifically, it included a statement (art. 2, subsection 1b) concerning the use of LIS in schools and universities and the realisation of specific programs for the education of professional figures, such as teachers and interpreters. It also stated that LIS must be integrated among the courses offered in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, promoting the use of LIS and other technologies among students and teachers in order to allow the communication with deaf people. Fur-

thermore, the bill includes dispositions to promote the use of LIS in public and private administrations and in the media, through subtitles and other tools, to grant full accessibility to information. Finally, it established that hearing aids, speech therapy and other technical means must be provided along with LIS, in order to remove communication barriers and to leave deaf people the freedom of choice. The bill was discussed in the Chamber of Deputies in May 2011, but after this debate a totally different approach was adopted. Representatives of all political parties accepted the use of the term *Linguaggio o tecnica comunicativa mimico-gestuale* (lit. ‘mimed-gestural language or communication technique’) rather than Italian Sign Language. Such definition appeared to be a serious step back within the process of LIS promotion. In fact, the adoption of this term contradicted the international declaration and ignored thirty-years of linguistic research supporting the dignity of this language. Moreover, the participants agreed in claiming that technological innovations make sign languages useless, thus ignoring the fact that not all kinds of deafness can be treated with the use of hearing aids. Such bill probably enhanced the misconception that bilingualism negatively interferes with the correct acquisition of the spoken language. On the contrary, there is increasing evidence, both at an international and national level that the use of the sign language promotes the correct acquisition of the spoken language. Thanks to an increasing of political and social measures, many schools and educational centres, today, are inclined to integrate sign language as a social inclusion tool for Deaf children. Bilingual/bimodal education programs are growing in visibility, especially with the rise of awareness of the Deaf Community [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4]. However, the lack of official language planning represents an obstacle to the final disclosure of LIS in educational and training environments.

New encouragement for the promotion of LIS and LISt comes from the Law no. 302 of 2017, even though no national funds are provided for supporting the organisation of courses and educational structures. As a result, training courses in LIS and LISt and other initiatives depend on local and national associations which support Deaf communities.

Most of the initiatives which support and promote the recognition of LIS are carried out by the *Ente Nazionale Sordi*, ENS (‘Italian National Agency of the Deaf’) [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 1]. It is present across Italy through local clubs and it represents a crucial national referent for Deaf people in the dialogue with political institutions. Furthermore, since its creation (1932), ENS promotes the use of sign language at all levels of the everyday life, being primarily involved in the definition of language planning. Specifically, a specialized department

of ENS takes care of issues related to educational policies, university accessibility, bilingualism and training of interpreters and other professional figures. ENS is not only an association promoting the recognition and use of LIS, but it is also important for the preservation of the cultural heritage related to LIS. Indeed, the libraries of many of the local clubs have collected publications about deafness, sign languages and the Deaf world and they represent an important archive for Deaf culture and history. Moreover, ENS is the promoter of many national and local workshops, seminars and conferences about various topics related to LIS. For the important impact they had, we recall here three conferences on LIS which were held in Trieste in 1995, Genoa in 1998, and Verona in 2007.

However, as anticipated before, the picture is not so homogeneous and favourable everywhere, as in Italy there are also some associations which support a strict oralist tradition and deny the use of LIS for deaf children education. One of the most famous associations overtly against the use of LIS is the *Italian Families Associated for Defending deaf Rights* (FIADDA). According to the members of this association, it is impossible to define a community on the basis of a physical deficit. The association fears that through the official recognition of LIS, deaf people will be kept in a state of cultural, economic and power dependency due to their linguistic closure.

Despite the difficulties that such internal oppositions can create, this debate is a remarkable sign of vitality within the Deaf Community. In the past thirty years, many changes took place which modified the domain of the use of LIS. Thanks to the advances in linguistic and psycholinguistics studies which allowed to prove that LIS is a natural language. The Deaf Community has started to use LIS with pride for everyday communications, and not just in a domestic environment, becoming more aware of its own rights. After the discussion of the bill (no. 37/S) at the chamber of Deputies, a unified movement composed by hearing and Deaf people (*Movimento LIS subito*, 'Movement LIS now') was created online in support of the recognition of LIS. The movement organised a three-day protest in Rome (March 25-27, 2011) to request the return to the original proposal, claiming that the definition of mimed-gestural languages is not just wrong, but offensive.

Together with ENS, another important supporter of the promotion of LIS is the Academic World: universities and academic researchers collaborate to support and give visibility to the importance of LIS recognition. In Italy, research on LIS began in the late 1970s, thanks to a group of scholars at the National Council of Research (CNR). They started with the investigation of the process of language acquisition and lan-

guage mastery in deaf children, which was first analysed by the team led by Virginia Volterra, Elena Pizzuto, and Elena Radutsky, in collaboration with ENS. Soon after, some deaf researchers joined the group: Serena Corazza, Emanuela Cameracanna, Anna Folchi, Paola Pinna, Paolo Rossini, and Benedetto Santarelli. The research carried out by the CNR also focuses on the grammar of LIS, on sign writing projects and on the acquisition of LIS in both deaf and hearing children.

About 20 years later, in the late 1990s, at the University of Salerno, professor Sandro Zucchi opened a second vein of research focusing on the formal aspects of LIS Linguistics. A few years later, he moved to the University of Milan and continued working on this project with professor Carlo Cecchetto from the University of Milan-Bicocca. Quite soon, some deaf people started to contribute to their research. Furthermore, in collaboration with the national association for Deafblind people in Italy (*Lega del Filo d'Oro*), the Milan group started a research project on the tactile variety of LIS, the sign language used by Deafblind people.

A crucial step that allowed to spread LIS within the national borders and later on to train students in the language and linguistics of LIS was the introduction of an optional LIS course among the classes offered at Ca' Foscari University of Venice starting from 1999, thanks to the interest of professor Anna Cardinaletti. In 2002, the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies of Ca' Foscari University of Venice offered the first official bachelor degree program in LIS. Since then, students can choose LIS from 17 foreign languages. Ca' Foscari is very much committed to the promotion of LIS offering both a bachelor's degree (BA) and a master's degree (MA). Today, in the BA program various courses on LIS and Deaf culture are available: three language courses of LIS, three courses of Deaf culture, a course in LIS linguistics, a course in Tactile Italian Sign Language, and two courses in Linguistic for deafness and hearing impairments. The MA program offers a course in Linguistics for deafness and hearing impairments, a general course of LIS and a course in advanced LIS linguistics. In 2011, Ca' Foscari University of Venice hired the first teacher of LIS with a permanent position within an Italian University and, in the same year, a research position was created for a linguist working on sign language linguistics.

From the year 2015, the University of Catania (in its branch in Ragusa) within the course in *Mediazione linguistica e interculturale* ('Linguistic and Intercultural Mediation') offers a BA degree with the possibility to study LIS. The University of Catania has also enrolled a linguist teaching and carrying out research on sign language linguistics and a lecturer of LIS.

Together with the universities of Venice and Catania, one of the main institutions which provides formational courses of LIS is ENS. Within ENS, a central administration provides detailed guidelines establishing the number of grades, the main objectives and the contents to be acquired in each grade. The general program of LIS courses is divided into three main stages: the first one consists in a short introduction to LIS (20-40 hours) which provides a general overview of LIS and Deaf culture; the second focuses on the teaching of LIS language and is structured into three levels: beginner (120 hours), intermediate (150 hours) and advanced (210 hours) level, which provides extensive theoretical and practical knowledge, and the third stage consists in the professional grade for training students in three different professions: technical operators, educators and interpreters.

Before each course starts, FALiCSEU (a specific department of ENS responsible for the quality of teaching programs) has to approve them. For this reason, three national registers of LIS teachers have been created: one for teachers of language, one for teachers of grammar and Deaf culture and one for coordinators. The teachers for the practical part are generally Deaf, while the teachers of the theoretical part may also be hearing people.

The involvement of ENS and the academic world plays a crucial role in the standardization of LIS, which is important to gain official recognition. An important project supporting standardization was developed in 2007: La Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Milan-Bicocca, and Ca' Foscari University of Venice received a two-year grant (2008-2010), PRIN 2007: *Dimensioni di variazione nella Lingua dei Segni Italiana* ('Dimensions of variation in Italian Sign Language'), for investigating linguistic variations in LIS. The project led to the creation of the first LIS Corpus [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 4.3]. Indeed, the collection of a corpus is one of the most important tasks for language planning. It represents an attempt to improve the adequacy of form and structure of a language and to trace the source of variability. It is related to the issue of standardization processes and language documentation which are necessary to understand the developmental stages of a language. More specifically, the existence of a language corpus allows to account for the variability among signers due to many social factors, as their geographic and family origins, their age, gender, educational background, and so on. In particular, the LIS Corpus has detected a strong effect of age among signers: young LIS Deaf signers use more standardized forms than older signers [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 4.4]. Although variation is a feature of all natural languages, the standardization process of a language has consequences for acquisition planning, in our specific

case, it can facilitate the acquisition of LIS as a second language, reducing the communication obstacles caused by its great variability.

Italian Universities also promote the visibility of LIS by organising workshops, meetings, national and international events. In 2004, the conference *Verbal and Sign Languages, Comparing Structures, Constructs and Methodologies* was held by the University of Rome-La Sapienza; in 2005 the conference *Signa Volant* was organised by the University of Milan-Bicocca; in 2011, 2014 and 2016 the University Ca' Foscari of Venice co-organised the conference on *Formal and Experimental Advances in Sign Language Theory* (FEAST), an international conference which focuses on formal and experimental approaches on sign languages. In order to increase foreign exchanges among Deaf people and Deaf communities, recently the Siena School of Liberal Arts introduced a Deaf studies program, which includes a semester where one class is taught in American sign language (ASL). A fundamental opportunity for Deaf people is represented by the *Mason Perkins Deafness Fund* (MPDF onlus), created in 1985, which provides scholarships for Italian Deaf students. The winners receive the opportunity to spend one academic year at the American Gallaudet University. The association also promotes the organisation of accessible cultural events and the creation of a national and international network of people who work in support of the Deaf community. Similarly, every year, the *Fulbright-Roberto Wirth Fund Scholarship at Gallaudet University* offers the opportunity to spend one academic year at Gallaudet University to Italian citizens. The winner can specialize in deafness studies supporting deaf or deafblind children research in Italy.

In the last years, two European projects have been developed at academic level thanks to the collaboration of Universities. The first project: COST Action IS1006 (2011-2015) *Sign Gram: Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage* led to design the SignGram Blueprint, the first guide for sign language grammars. The chair of the Action was Prof. Josep Quer (Universitat Pompeu Fabra). Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Bicocca University of Milan and La Sapienza University of Rome were the national research groups involved in the project. The second European project is *SIGN-HUB: preserving, researching and fostering the linguistic, historical and cultural heritage of European Deaf signing communities with an integral resource*. It is a 4-year research project (2016-2020) funded by the European Commission within Horizon 2020 involving different European and non-European countries (Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, France, and Israel). The national universi-

ties involved in the project are: the University of Milan-Bicocca and Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Aim of the project is the creation of an innovative and inclusive resource hub for the linguistic, historical and cultural documentation of the different sign languages, for supporting Deaf communities and for sign language evaluation on clinical and school frameworks. The SIGN-HUB project has developed a digital platform to host: i) a digital grammar of 6 sign languages (DGS, LIS, LSC, LSE, NGT, TID); ii) an interactive digital Atlas sharing the linguistic properties of sign languages; iii) the development of diagnostic tests for sign language assessment, and iv) the creation of a digital archive of older signers' linguistic and cultural heritage.

Another relevant issue for increasing the possibility of the official recognition of LIS consists in language planning. After several local experiments [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4] an important attempt to set up a national plan for the education of deaf children was the project entitled *Model of integrated special school services for Deaf individuals* (MoSSSiS) presented to the Ministry of Education by the *Italian Association of Educators of Deaf Children* (AIES). The project aimed at offering an educational model which successfully integrates hearing and deaf children, involving a national centre of coordination and local branches. The national centre promotes specific training courses for educators and teachers of Deaf children, and provides teaching materials and relevant documentations on the education of deaf children. Often special needs teachers received general training for covering a broad variety of children with different impairments, but the issues related to deafness are not properly faced. Moreover, this project wants to create specific bilingual programs and a lifelong learning program which prevents Deaf adults to return to illiteracy.

Evidence for a greater awareness on the importance of LIS comes from the increasing of professional roles and figures related to sign language: language teachers, interpreters, cultural mediators and educators [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4]. As for the professional training of sign language interpreters, there are two important associations in Italy: ANIOS and ANIMU. The former is mostly based in the northern part of Italy, and the latter more in the south. The competence of LIS interpreters has increased in the last few decades, but the interpretation from LIS to other sign or spoken languages (and from a foreign sign or spoken languages into LIS) still needs to be improved to ensure access for Deaf people to international scenarios. Cultural Mediators are professional figures who work in official situations such as the public administration, public security, social and welfare services, facilitating communication among Deaf and hearing adults. As for educators, they are facilitators who work

in public schools within educational programs for deaf children, in order to support the integration between Deaf and hearing children. The improvement of the educational planning for Deaf people is crucial to assure them the possibility to have access to highly qualified professional jobs.

3.3 Language attitudes

This section provides a description of the way in which signers and non-signers perceive LIS. Since this language has long been considered an inferior communication system, the attitude toward signs differs across generations of signers and non-signers.

The Law 517/1977 facilitated the inclusion of Deaf people into public social contexts, but it had no impact on the linguistic condition of the Deaf community. When and how the situation started to change it is hard to say. It is likely that LIS started to raise awareness along with the development of the research investigating its grammar and the impact on language acquisition.

Among the precursors of this important process, it is worth mentioning Massimo Facchini, the director of the phonological centre in Bologna. At the end of the 1970 he reopened the discussion about the effectiveness of *gestures* in deaf training, since *gestures* have often been forbidden in the past.

Further scientific research developed in Rome, following the pioneering studies of Stokoe on American Sign Language (ASL), thus providing further evidence for the importance of sign language investigation. Virginia Volterra, Elena Pizzuto, and Elena Radutzky have been the first researchers to take steps in this direction. Thanks to them, the first meeting on sign language studies took place in Rome at the Psychological Institute of CNR in February 1979.

In June of the same year, the *First International Symposium on Sign Language Research* was organised in Stockholm, followed by another one in Copenhagen sponsored by NATO. From then on, many conferences have been organised in Italy, testifying an increasing wave of interest in the sign language field.

The great interest of academics leading to the recognition of sign languages as fully-fledged natural languages developed in a period in which Deaf people were still not aware of the richness of their own language. As a matter of fact, in those years, signs were used in very familiar contexts or in the Deaf clubs, and their use was purposely avoided in public situations for reasons of shame. Italian hearing people used the term *sordomuto* ('deaf and dumb') to refer to

deaf people, because of the common misconception that Deaf people were also mute (nowadays the Law 95/2006 has changed the term into *deaf*). The local and individual variation of signs was significant, many Deaf people with a strong oral education only used signs in support of spoken Italian, thus increasing the confusion on the boundaries between signs and the spoken language. Moreover, the few existing interpreters were only called to translate signs from spoken Italian, no translation from signs to the spoken language was provided for Deaf signers.

In such a context, Deaf people looked suspiciously at the rising interest of academics on LIS, as they considered inappropriate that hearing academics studied a language considered exclusive property of the Deaf Community. This is one of the reasons why Deaf people continued for several years to use the term *mimic-gestural language* in opposition to the term LIS, which was coined by academics. Indeed, the term *Italian Sign Language* was created in order to distinguish gestures from signs and to support its status as a natural language.

Together with the increase of the linguistic research on LIS, it arose the necessity to properly train interpreters. The first to be officially trained were the interpreters involved for the *Third International Symposium on Sign Language research* organised in Rome in 1983. Nowadays, the CNR has become one of the beating hearts of sign language research and is a proactive promoter in its dissemination all over Italy.

Starting in 1986, some scholarships offered by the Association *Mason Perkins Deafness Fund* allowed young Deaf students to attend courses at the Gallaudet University in Washington [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3.2]. After this experience, these students became important reference points for fostering cultural and educational events in their own cities promoting LIS. In so doing, the attitude of deaf people towards their own language started to change and, in the same period, some collaborations between hearing and Deaf communities were created with the same will of promote LIS courses and cultural events. We mention, among others, *SILIS* (group for studies and information of LIS) created in Rome in 1989, the cooperative *DIRE* opened in Turin in 1990 and *Orgoglio Sordo* ('Deaf Pride') started in Milan in 1990.

Nowadays, Deaf people are aware of the status of their own language and use LIS in public with great pride. Actually, the number of Deaf users increases year after year, and there is a deeper consciousness about the difference between LIS and Signed Italian [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4].

During the last few decades, the attitude of hearing people has changed as well, and LIS courses have become extremely popular.

This led to the necessity of creating the first collection of signs and the first vocabularies to facilitate the learning process [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 4.2]. Moreover, the increased possibility developed in the last years of being provided with interpreting services, lead more Deaf students to attend university and undertake the academic career.

Crucial in the process of attitude change towards sign language has been the spreading of LIS through the media. Since 1993, several editions of the national TV news are interpreted in LIS every day representing a key source of information for Deaf people, especially among the older signers. By 1995, the President's New Year speech is interpreted in LIS. Moreover, some documentaries on LIS started to be made and transmitted via public channels, among other: *Segna con me* ('Sign with me'), a film documentary on LIS realised by Silvia Bencivelli and Chiara Tarfano and broadcasted on *Rai Storia* on September 26, 2015.

In the last years, Deaf artists and LIS started to appear on TV or have been called into public shows, increasing the visibility of the Deaf community. Examples are the Silent Beat hosted by Fabio Fazio in *Quello che (non) ho* ('The things I do (not) have') broadcasted on La7 (May 16, 2012), the singer Daniele Silvestri who appeared with an interpreter at *Sanremo*, a very popular Italian music festival, or the Deaf rapper Eugenio Scarlato, who participated at *Italia's Got Talent*, and many others (for further information see [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.3]). All these events are contributing to deeply changing the perception of signs for both signers and non-signers.

Surely, the increasing awareness and knowledge of sign languages is parallel to the technological developments. The most important resources used by Deaf people are digital technologies and the internet. ENS's main websites provide daily information on the community, local association activities and everyday life. Beside these, social networks and video blogs (*Vlogs*) are the preferred platforms for sharing opinions and comments among the members of the Italian Deaf community. Younger Deaf signers are surprisingly not the unique internet users: the 9.92% of signers over fifty-years old regularly use the Internet for communication as well. Many web pages regarding sign languages in general have been created in social networks, which have become not only a tool of communication, but also a way through which fostering the standardization and broadcasting of LIS across the country.

Despite these positive signals of general improvements, common misconceptions about deafness are still present, especially among hearing people who have never been in contact with Deaf people and Deaf culture. Deafness has often been defined as an invisible deficit,

indeed a deaf person is not suddenly identifiable, unlike other types of impairments, for example a blind person who may be more recognizable, with a white stick, dog and black sunglasses. Blindness in history has always been recognized as a noble deficit, since blind people attended higher training organisations and could benefit from a significant status in society.

The invisibility of deafness, instead, contributed to the consolidation of false prejudices and misconceptions about deaf people. As mentioned before, one of the most common mistakes concerns the use of the term *sordomuto*, which is often spread among hearing people who have never been in contact with deafness. It is very rare that deaf people are also mute, being this a situation occurring only when deafness is linked to a vocal and articulatory problem. Thus, the term *sordomuto* is wrong and inappropriate, as also stated by the Law 95/2006.

Much worse is the misconception about deaf people who are also considered to be dumb, reminiscence of the old term *deaf and dumb* used in the past. Because of their lack of hearing, many deaf people were institutionalized in clinics for mental diseases just because of a wrong diagnosis or clinical ignorance. Deaf people were also deported under Nazism and they were analysed by scientists and doctors for eugenics studies, together with other people considered untypical, for example gypsies and homosexuals.

Other false conceptions about Deaf people are related to sign language. Indeed, signs are often considered a rude pantomime through which it is impossible to share complex thoughts and deep meanings. Furthermore, signs are supposed to be dangerous for the acquisition of the spoken language. Although linguistic and psycholinguistic studies have proved this belief to be wrong, it is still widespread in many clinical and educational environments, where doctors and teachers still obstacle and discourage the use of LIS in education. One of the most common misconceptions about sign languages concerns the false belief that signs are universal. For unknown reasons, probably linked to the misconception that signs are not linguistic units but *gestures*, they are believed to be shared by deaf from all over the world. As widely known, every country has its own developed and codified sign language, which, just like spoken languages, can share etymological influences and connections, depending on the historical processes of contact but, being based on arbitrariness, as all natural languages are, differs greatly, especially in the lexicon.

Prejudices and misconceptions represent barriers for the total integration and inclusion of Deaf people in society, this is why it is important to support and spread knowledge and information about this minority language and its community.

Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in this chapter are based on the references below. Please see the data and consultant information in these references.

Authorship Information

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