

Irish Sign Language

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Introduction

This year is designated as the European Year of Languages by the European Union to promote linguistic and cultural diversity across Europe. In Ireland, apart from English and Irish, perhaps the most significant ‘other language’ is Irish Sign Language (ISL). The Irish Deaf community regards ISL as the primary language of the community and in celebration of the European Year of Languages a calendar of events has been organised by the Irish Deaf Society to increase the public consciousness about the presence of ISL in Irish society. In this article we will briefly describe ISL itself and some related socio-linguistic matters.

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Irish Sign Language

Signing systems used by people fall into three main categories. Primary sign languages are the languages of deaf communities all over the world, such as Irish Sign Language in Ireland, British Sign Language in the UK, Swedish Sign Language in Sweden, and so on. Alternate sign languages are used in particular social, religious or cultural contexts by individuals and social groups whose primary language is a spoken language. In this category are the sign languages of native Americans, Australian aboriginal peoples and Trappist monks. Where they have been analysed, alternate sign languages have been found to reflect the structures of the spoken languages of the users' community. They do not share the characteristic features of primary sign languages such as non-manual features, a complex layered grammar nor extensive use of spatial reference.

The third category contains signing systems which have developed out of the interaction between deaf and hearing people, especially in educational settings, and are usually referred to as manually coded languages (MCLs). Many examples of MCLs date from the earliest attempts to teach literacy in schools for deaf pupils. Manually coded languages are usually based on the grammatical structures of the dominant spoken language. Examples from English speaking countries (i.e. Manually Coded English) are the Paget Gorman system, Seeing Essential English and Signing Exact English. These signing systems come under the general heading of signed English. A manually coded system is akin to writing and, like writing, it cannot be acquired as a primary language and has a specific but limited range of functions.

Misconceptions about primary sign languages, common in early writings on the subject, have persisted down to the present day. One major misconception is that sign language is universal. The 17th century philosophers

of language looked to sign language as the universal language of mankind and developed linguistic theories and programmes based on this premise. Modern research has shown that primary sign languages differ from each other in ways that are similar to the ways in which spoken languages differ. The origins of sign languages are as much a mystery as the origins of spoken languages. We do know that they have existed since the earliest times and that they are the main means of communication whenever and wherever deaf people gather together.

A second misconception is that primary sign languages are derived from spoken languages. Again, research has shown that this is not the case and that primary sign languages have independent phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures. Thus the 'Irish' in Irish Sign Language refers to the fact that it is the language of the deaf community, and not to any association with spoken Irish. A related misconception is that primary sign languages are 'simple' or 'concrete', or that they are 'ungrammatical'. This perception can be attributed to the fact that in the past a primary sign language was often interpreted or analysed in terms of the grammar of a spoken language rather in terms of its own grammar. Like spoken languages, however, sign languages are also changed through contact with educational systems and with other languages both spoken and sign.

Only in very recent years have the grammars of a number of sign languages been analysed and described. However, the view of primary sign languages as debased languages has proved to be remarkably persistent, especially in educational contexts. For example, even after three decades of detailed research in American and other sign languages, a leading educationalist commented, "Linguistic phonology and functional morphology are not found in signs . A linguistic syntax does not exist either" (van Uden 1986, 197). Such views have more to do with power, status and with attitudes than with any understanding of sign language itself.

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Attitudes to Sign Language

Deaf people in Ireland live in a complex sociolinguistic environment. A minority deaf community lives in a contact relationship with a dominant hearing society. Thus, Irish Sign Language exists in a contact relationship with English. English is the language associated with the educational system, with employment opportunities and with social mobility. ISL, by comparison, has no public status. It is the language of a minority; indeed until recently it was not recognised or accepted as a language at all.

The relationship between the deaf community and education service providers is asymmetrical in terms of power. Typically, hearing people control the key institutions and services which affect the lives of deaf people. Typically, deaf people are excluded from policy-making and administrative structures which otherwise might provide an 'insider' perspective on deafness. Deaf people are also largely excluded from teaching services and educational guidance programmes. Therefore there are few opportunities for deaf people to contribute to the educational services they themselves will receive.

There is little doubt about the current feelings of deaf people about the need to give ISL a central role in the school curriculum. There is also little doubt about their desire that ISL should constitute a central element in the linguistic experience of deaf students. As far back as 1981, a paper submitted at a seminar on deaf education by St. Vincent's Deaf Community Centre urged deaf schools to include signing in the curriculum. Since that time the Deaf community has consistently emphasised the importance of sign language in education and for several years now has been campaigning for major reforms in education. The establishment of a Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin represents a major step forward. Another issue has been that deaf students should be enabled to do the non-language subjects in public examinations in Irish

Sign Language.

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Access and Outcomes in Third Level Education

Two major reports on education in Ireland have expressed concern about equality - about the need for "greater equity in education" (Department of Education 1992, 5) about "full equality of access, participation and benefit" (Department of Education 1995, 24). Research shows that there are serious and persistent inequalities in our educational system, especially in the area of further education (Drudy and Lynch 1993; Clancy 1995).

Very large amounts of money have been invested in education over the past 30 years, yet high levels of inequality have persisted. While most attention has been given to the inequalities related to class and gender, much less attention has been given to disability as an equality issue, and no attention at all has been given to deafness as an equality issue. In the report of the Special Education Review Committee (Department of Education 1993) equality does not feature either as a guiding principle or as a policy objective. The same report regards deafness as a clinical / pathological condition in spite of the existence of thirty years of research which shows that deafness is a matter of community and language rather than a matter of psychology or medicine.

The Deaf community in Ireland experiences high levels of discrimination and inequality in the educational system. Little detailed research is available but we can make the following general points about third level education:

- a high proportion of Deaf students are placed in rehabilitation programmes;
- Deaf students appear to be over-represented in specific sectors of these programmes;
- very few deaf students have access to other institutions of higher education such as universities or technological institutes.

This placement pattern clearly reflects a psycho-medical model of deaf students rather than a model that has its rationale in language and culture.

When we discuss equality in education we usually refer to third level education. However, in relation to deaf children, we need to include primary education in our discussion. In our educational system, inequality and access problems for deaf pupils begin at primary level and continue right through the system into third level. Deaf children still do not have access to Irish Sign Language in the school. And because they do not have access to Irish Sign Language they do not have access to a full curriculum; they do not reach satisfactory levels of achievement; their progress does not reflect their real potential. These unsatisfactory levels of achievement continue into second level schooling and reduce their opportunities to enter or participate in further education programmes.

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Promoting Better Access and Outcomes in Further Education

As I have just suggested, the promotion of equality in the education of deaf children must begin at primary level. For several years now parents of deaf children have been trying to establish a programme of bilingual education for their children. All children in our society spend their childhood and teenage years studying their primary language. This study forms the core of the school curriculum, part of the work of each day in school.

The primary language is the gateway to other areas of the curriculum - the sciences, the arts, business studies, mathematics, even the technical subjects. For deaf children the primary language is Irish Sign Language because this is the one language that has no access barriers.

Bilingual education is something that makes logical and educational sense. It is based on educational, linguistic and sociolinguistic research and, more importantly, it has its roots in the knowledge and experiences of the deaf community; it is not something being imposed by external experts. A second requirement for equalising opportunities is to enable deaf students to do their examinations through Irish Sign Language. If our society is really interested in abolishing discrimination against deaf students these are two examples of basic requirements for equalising opportunities in education.

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Conclusion

Having explained the nature of ISL briefly and its significance in the education system for the Irish Deaf community, it is clear that it is important to increase public awareness of Irish Sign Language. With recently enacted equality legislation and increasing confidence within the Irish Deaf community to promote and uphold the ISL, it is also important for third-level institutions to make appropriate provision in order to accommodate the users of the Irish Sign Language. One such provision that must be urgently introduced is a facility to enable Deaf students to take their examinations (to include assignments and other forms of assessment) through Irish Sign Language. A measure of this kind would go some way towards the creation of greater equality for Deaf students.

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