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Ethical implications of language standardisation for sign language interpreters

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1. Introduction

Sign language interpreters in the Netherlands are confronted with an unexpected ethical dilemma, involving language politics. These language politics involve the implementation of the standardisation of Sign Language of the Netherlands that was initiated by the Dutch government. In this paper we pose that the task of the interpreter is to facilitate communication according to the client's wishes, and not to use the language variant that is assigned a special status through governmental policies.

Many themes with regard to language standardisation would merit serious discussion, but in this paper we choose to limit ourselves to the consequences for interpreters.

2. Background: variation in NGT

Nederlandse Gebarentaal (NGT, Sign Language of the Netherlands) is used by a Deaf community of between 15.000 and 25.000 people in the Netherlands, which has a total population of 16 Million people. There are various regional NGT dialects, which developed in Deaf communities that evolved from the five deaf institutes.

In the 1980s, when the first sign language dictionary was created, five different regions were distinguished, and lexical variants were included in a basic dictionary of about 1500 terms. This lexical variation is described in Schermer (1990). A large percentage of the basic lexicon is shared among two or more regions, only a relatively small part of the lexicon shows variation among regions. While variation at other linguistic levels (phonological, morphological, and syntactic) has not been systematically investigated, the public opinion is that there are only lexical variants. However, from a linguistic point of view, it is most likely that there are also regional variations in the grammar.

3. Background: official recognition of NGT and the demand for standardisation

In the mid 1990s, the national government recognised that they might have to undertake action to grant official recognition to NGT. The European charter for regional and minority languages explicitly lists sign languages among the languages and dialects that need special protection.¹ This protection could take the form of

¹ See the Report on the Rights of National Minorities: <http://stars.coe.fr/doc/doc01/EDOC8920.htm>.

‘official recognition’ with reference to the aforementioned European charter. In the Netherlands, several regional languages have been recognised, such as Lower Saxon, the Limburg dialect, and Frisian. The latter is spoken in the North of the country and has been awarded the highest recognition according to chapter III².

In 1996 the Dutch government installed a committee to explore what recognition of NGT would involve, and what the financial implications would be. The committee published a report on the recognition of NGT in 1997, which stated that only lexical variation was present in NGT and that standardisation of NGT is necessary to facilitate learning by hearing people (parents, professionals working in education, and so on) in contact with deaf signers (Commissie NGT 1997). Also, the production of video materials for the purpose of teaching in deaf schools would be simpler and cheaper if there were only one variant: all schools would be able to use the same materials.

Following this report, the government indicated that they would be willing to recognise NGT, provided that a standardisation process would be implemented. This led to the STABOL project: “standardisation of basic lexicon and lexicon for educational settings”. The Dutch Sign Centre (Nederlands Gebarencentrum, NGc), responsible for the process of selecting and developing new standardised signs, has completed the project in 2002. To a large extent, the standardisation process, which involved deaf people from different regions, consisted of compiling a well-balanced mix of existing signs from each region. However, in some cases new signs were created as well.

The completion of the STABOL project in 2002 resulted in the decision on which signs became part of the standard lexicon. The actual standardization of the language within the Deaf community on the basis of the established lexicon will be a matter of generations. It cannot be predicted how successful the standardisation process will be, and to what extent and for how long the remaining regional variants remain in use.

4. Implications for interpreters

4.1 Standardisation as a new variant for the language community

Every Dutch hearing person is able to use a form of standard spoken Dutch, often in addition to a local dialect. Hearing people can therefore rely on this form, ill-defined as it may be. For NGT, the situation is very different: there is no national standard variant that has evolved naturally; there are only the regional variants. Most deaf people are at least passively aware of the different forms used in other variants.

Standardisation of NGT as it is carried out now in the Netherlands implies the addition of a new variant, a mix of signs from different regions that are learned by some people as the only variant. Since 2002 it is widely used in primary schools and used for teaching second language learners, which is the only variant available to these groups.

While the standardisation process now taking place, only concerns the lexicon, the dilemmas faced by interpreters (‘which version should they use in which situation?’) include all variations. Although so far the claim has been that NGT only contains lexical variation, this does not hold for phonology, and is most unlikely for any part of the grammar (Crasborn 2001). Given the limited linguistic knowledge we have of sign languages, it is premature to claim that there is no variation at a certain

² <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/WhatYouWant.asp?NT=148&CM=8&DF=27/07/01>

level of the grammar. Rather, given what we know about language and language use in general, it is most likely that there *is* in fact a regional variation at all linguistic levels.

Aside from regional variation in language use, interpreters will also be faced with other types of language variation. For example, there are gender differences in language use in the regional language communities, as well as differences among age groups. Similar to the situation in Ireland (Lemaster & Dwyer 1991), older signers in the Northern region in the Netherlands still talk about differences in signing between men and women as a result of the separation of the two groups in the deaf institute.

4.2 Current implications for interpreters

In the Netherlands there is one NGT interpreter training program. This four-year program currently has no formal policy on the basis of which signs are being taught: standardised signs or “old” signs. This means that interpreters that are currently being trained are offered a hybrid lexicon from the different regions and the STABOL lexicon. No systematic effort is made to separate the different variants, or to train interpreters to use more than one variant. Information on regional variants is only available to students on some of the publicly available lexicon CD-ROMs.

In addition, there are seasoned interpreters who have never been trained in any of the new standardised signs, since standardisation has only recently started. A first series of training workshops for interpreters was organised in the past year (2005). As a result, there is a great variety in lexical knowledge between interpreters, which impacts the deaf clients facing different interpreters, and different lexical variants.

There have been complaints from elderly deaf people that they do not understand the signs that are being used by the newly trained interpreters. The reverse seems to occur as well. New interpreters find it extremely hard to understand the older members of the Deaf community. Essentially, dealing with lexical variation is a common issue in the Dutch interpreter–client relationships. All deaf clients working with an interpreter are confronted with old, new, and different standardised signs used by interpreters.

4.3 The interpreting issue and future implications

So which variant should interpreters use? Should they anticipate a future state of the language and only use STABOL lexicon? Or should they use the variant that they have been trained to use, or are accustomed to? The thesis we would like to defend, is that the interpreter should adapt her or his language use to that of the clients. Given that some clients will use the standardised signs, and some will use the other variants, the interpreter will need to acquire the standardised signs as well as all the other variants.

This has great implications for the interpreter training program and the interpreters who have already graduated. The training program will need to instruct all interpreting students in standardised sign as well as the existing regional variants, and teach them to use one of the variants, depending on the target audience. Seasoned interpreters need to take on the responsibility of learning all the new standardised signs. All interpreters will then be skilled in this wide range of signs, and can then adapt to the clients needs and wishes. Alternatively, people can choose to interpret in only one variant.

But suppose an interpreter who encounters an interpreting situation, in which it is not clear which variant must be used. For instance, when many deaf people are present during a public event, or because there has been no agreement on which

variant to use prior to the event. Which form should the interpreter choose; the standardised signs or another variant?

The NBTG³ Code of Ethics states in article 4.1: “The interpreter will interpret the message completely and faithfully, the contents as well as the intentions of the clients. The interpreter will take the social and cultural differences into consideration.” In article 2, the code says that the interpreter will accept an assignment on the basis of their skills and knowledge. The articles give the interpreter some guidance on how to deal with requests or demands on specific use of language. In other words, in the case of article 2 the interpreter could say that the interpreter does or does not have the skills to interpret standardised signs, if this is the case. However, typically the interpreter does not know which standardised or regional variants are used until she arrives at the assignment. Does the interpreter then have to take into consideration that he or she is already there, and will make the best of it, in agreement with the client, or must the interpreter turn down the assignment because of a lack of skills? The problem disappears if all interpreters are trained to systematically distinguish between variants. This is a relatively easy task if the variation only consists of a few hundred lexical items, but what if research provides more information on dialectal variation in different areas of the grammar as well?

4.4 Responsibility of implementation

In a recent study, Deaf people have been asked who they think should be responsible for spreading the standardised signs (van Dijken 2004). The majority replied that they would like to learn the new signs from the interpreters. This is not what you would like to hear as an interpreter, for it implies that interpreters are the ones responsible for using and spreading new signs, which is opposite to what happens in the natural development of a language. Normally, not the non-native but the native users (and thus the core members of the Deaf community) play a central role in spreading new vocabulary items.

The above study implies that someone should indeed be responsible for spreading a standardised lexicon. If members of the Deaf community were asked whether they themselves would want the language to be standardised, it might be expected that there is limited enthusiasm for standardisation in the first place. Deaf people typically indicate that they understand that the regional variation can be an obstacle for second language learners such as interpreters and parents of deaf children, but that the variation forms no problem for Deaf people themselves. Just as happened with the increased appreciation and status for regional variants of Dutch after their recognition, Deaf people may also see the regional variation as a positive feature of sign language, an expression of the richness of Deaf culture in the Netherlands.

By merely using the STABOL lexicon in every situation, the interpreter would (probably unconsciously) become an instrument for implementing language politics. Regardless of whether the interpreter agrees with the language politics in question, this would violate the neutral role interpreters are supposed to have, as emphasised in their code of ethics.

³ Nederlandse Beroepsvereniging van Tolken Gebarentaal (Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters).

5. Conclusion

We argue that in the case of NGT, an interpreter should always be neutral and aim to adapt to the language use of the clients, and be cautious not to be used as an instrument for language politics. Therefore, continuing education is a crucial instrument that interpreters should employ in order to keep up with new signs as they develop during their career. This includes variants that are the result of language planning if they are actually adopted by groups within the Deaf community. When more information becomes available on variation beyond the lexicon (morphology, syntax, discourse processes), it may become harder to systematically keep different variants of the language apart. This in turn may imply that interpreters need to specialise in interpreting some of the dialects that are in use.

This specialisation in a sign language dialect could not be all that different from specialising in interpreting in specific settings, such as in the judicial system or secondary education. For interpreters who started working before the year 2002, and especially interpreters who were trained in the previous interpreting programme (until ±1997) where limited lexicon material was available, regional specialisation was an automatic by-product of mostly working in a specific region. For newly trained interpreters, it would be useful if lexicon lists became available with specific regional signs.

Finally, we would like to emphasise that our argument for adapting to the language use of the client also includes other types of linguistic variation than variation between regions, including differences between generations and between men and women. Further research on NGT is needed to get a view on the forms this variation takes in the Netherlands.

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