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"So, why do you sign?" Deaf and hearing new signers, their motivation, and revitalisation policies for sign languages

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**“So, why do you sign?”
Deaf and hearing new signers, their motivation, and
revitalisation policies for sign languages**

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“So, why do you sign?”

Deaf and hearing new signers, their motivation, and revitalisation policies for sign languages

1. Introduction

The Flipside, a website which playfully addresses life as a deaf person generally, and in the U.S. specifically, in September 2017 publishes a video. We see a deaf person spotting someone signing on the street and approaching the person by asking “are you deaf”? The presenter then intervenes, saying “we must do something” about this “are you deaf?”-question, and “need to come up with a different approach”. Indeed, he says, this person could as well be any hearing person who knows American Sign Language (ASL). The sketch is then replayed with the deaf person approaching the same person, and the conversation goes like this:

- “You know ASL?”

- “Yes I do.”

- “Me too! I am deaf. What about you?”

- “Oh, I am a language enthusiast. I love learning different languages. So far, ASL is my favourite one.”¹

This brief vignette illustrates that sign languages are becoming part of the linguistic repertoires of an increasing number of hearing people. Sign languages are no longer in-group languages mainly used by deaf people and their children. Evolutions in broadcasting, communication technologies, social media, and the greater availability of formal learning opportunities mean that the public visibility of and access to sign languages for hearing people is greater than ever before.

In many American and some Canadian postsecondary contexts, ASL courses have emerged as an increasingly popular foreign-language offering (Snoddon 2016). On a

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/theflipsideshow/videos/341873389597212/>

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3 30 blog, a deaf traveller from the UK recently described his experience in the U.S. as
4 31 “ASL signers suddenly appearing out of nowhere”, having had 14 encounters over 10
5 32 days when someone could sign in ASL: shop assistants, waiters, immigration officials,
6 33 metro security staff, et cetera.² In a European context it is estimated that there are
7 34 “eight to ten hearing sign language users per each signing deaf person” in Sweden
8 35 (Svartholm 2014). In the UK, for every deaf person who uses British Sign Language
9 36 (BSL) there are nine hearing people “who have some knowledge of the language”
10 37 (Woll and Adam 2012: 111). The 2016 Census in Ireland showed that there are 4,944
11 38 people using Irish Sign Language; it is estimated that most of them are hearing.³ There
12 39 is a significant interest in *Baby Sign* courses, which are specifically aimed at hearing
13 40 parents with hearing babies (Pizer et al. 2007; Snoddon 2014).

23 41 At the same hearing people are enjoying greater access to sign languages, there appear
24 42 to be fewer deaf children who, early on, adopt a sign language in their linguistic
25 43 repertoires. Over 95% of deaf children has hearing parents (Mitchell and Karchmer
26 44 2004). In northern Europe, an estimated 80% of those children are now receiving
27 45 cochlear implants (Boyes-Braem and Rathmann 2010). Research shows that the
28 46 uptake of CI is associated with decreased or nonuse of sign language by parents and
29 47 children (Bruin and Nevøy 2014; Takkinen 2017). Indeed, most of these children are
30 48 acquiring a primary spoken language, with or without exposure to sign language
31 49 (Humphries et al. 2017). Research also shows, though, that some hearing parents of
32 50 deaf children with a CI *do* seek opportunities to learn sign language but are often
33 51 advised against doing so, find institutional and practical support for it to be weak,
34 52 and/or perceive a loss of contexts for intergenerational and collective socialisation in
35 53 sign language (McKee 2017; McKee and Smiler 2017; Snoddon 2016, 2017).

46 54 This loss of contexts is a direct result of the erosion of the collective language and
47 55 cultural transmission spaces of sign language communities (SLCs), communities
48 56 which have historically emerged in specific geographical locations around the world.
49 57 Intra- and intergenerational transmission settings like deaf schools are disappearing,
50 58 and deaf children are now being placed in a wide variety of educational settings, most

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58 ² <http://limpingchicken.com/2017/10/24/john-walker-travelling-alone-in-america-made-me-believe-that-a-gcse-in-bsl-is-important/>

59
60 ³ Personal communication John Bosco Conama, June 28th 2017.

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3 59 often as the only deaf child in regular schools for hearing non-signing children
4
5 60 (Murray et al. 2018). The demise of the deaf schools is paired with threats to the
6
7 61 maintenance of other collective physical spaces and social networks for sign language
8
9 62 use, like deaf clubs and organized local and regional sporting networks. In the past,
10
11 63 these functioned in tandem with the deaf schools and led to a connection between
12
13 64 different generations because they were the primary sites where older and younger
14
15 65 people met and where newcomers were enculturated by more veteran members (Ladd
16
17 66 2003; Sutton-Spence 2010).

18
19 67 Conversely, because 95% of deaf parents has hearing children, in the youngest age
20
21 68 groups it is likely that there are now more hearing than deaf children who adopt a sign
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23 69 language in their linguistic repertoires, most often in the space of the home. There is
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25 70 an increasing inclination among deaf parents to sign with their hearing children and
26
27 71 pass on the language.

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29 72 These are the major factors that have led to a new sociolinguistic order in SLCs with
30
31 73 numerical disparities in four domains: (1) a decrease in the number of what I call deaf
32
33 74 *traditional signers* (biased towards the older age groups); (2) the group of what I call
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35 75 deaf *new signers* (with a non-traditional background and sign language acquisition
36
37 76 path) becoming rule rather than exception; (3) a growing and heterogeneous group of
38
39 77 hearing *new signers* with mixed investments in sign languages; and (4) an imbalance
40
41 78 in the group of deaf vs. hearing children who have a sign language in their linguistic
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43 79 repertoires. De Meulder & Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily
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45 80 hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also
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47 81 language revitalization, since the expanding pool of 'new signers' can serve to sustain
48
49 82 the existence of sign languages. Bauman & Murray (2017: 252) mention the parallel
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51 83 "dissemination" and "decimation" of ASL use and state that "if we include family
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53 84 members and sign language students, it is likely that a majority of those who know
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55 85 national sign languages are now hearing, not deaf". These changes must be seen
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57 86 against the backdrop of wider changing demographic and sociolinguistic profiles of
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59 87 Western societies as a result of globalization, increased mobility and new
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61 88 technological developments (Vertovec 2007).

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3 89 To discuss and analyse this changing sociolinguistic order, in this article I want to test
4 90 the appropriateness of the ‘new speaker’ concept that has been used in the context of
5 91 some of Europe’s lesser-used languages (O’Rourke et al. 2015). Indeed, these
6 92 numerical disparities are not unique to SLCs and are found in some indigenous
7 93 language groups like the Sámi (Sarivaraa et al. 2013) and Māori (Spolsky 2003) of
8 94 which the majority of young speakers are so-called *revitalised* speakers, and in the
9 95 context of European minority languages like Irish, Galician, Catalan and Basque with
10 96 many *new speakers*, often outnumbering traditional speakers altogether (O’Rourke et
11 97 al. 2015).

12 98 Going forward, I will explore the motivation of deaf and hearing new signers to (learn
13 99 to) sign or (re)adopt sign language. I will then link these different motivations to
14 100 revitalisation policies targeted at sign languages. Indeed, of the three conditions for a
15 101 language to thrive, capacity, opportunity, and motivation (Grin 2003), motivation is
16 102 now increasingly being understood as the most crucial barrier to successful language
17 103 maintenance and revitalisation (Cowell 2016). Merely giving people the right to use
18 104 their language via legal means, or increase their opportunities to use it via e.g.
19 105 government services in the language does not necessarily affect people's motivation
20 106 and need to use a language.

21 107 Motivations are directly tied to language ideologies (Rosa and Burdick 2016). Sign
22 108 languages and the people who use them are currently the object of **specific** ideologies
23 109 (Hill 2013; Krausneker 2015), which drive revitalisation policies. The use of sign
24 110 languages by deaf adults, hearing parents of deaf children and especially deaf children
25 111 themselves are often the target of ideologies **that discourage or devalue the use of sign**
26 112 **languages**. For them, sign languages are questioned as languages per se, seen as
27 113 compensations for hearing loss or incompetency to acquire a spoken language, and
28 114 seen as a hampering deaf children’s spoken language development (Humphries et al.
29 115 2017).

30 116 At the same time **a different set** of ideologies, mostly linked to their use by and
31 117 exposure to hearing people, give many sign languages prestige: for example, they are
32 118 seen as beneficial for hearing babies to communicate their needs more efficiently
33 119 before their spoken language develops, are used in video games, apps, television

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3 120 series, movies, sports events, children songs, Disney commercials, and are gaining
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5 121 popularity on other cultural, artistic and commercial scenes.
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8 122 This constitutes an ironic double bind for SLCs: while their languages are increasingly
9
10 123 being popularized and institutionalised, at the same time they find themselves
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12 124 becoming increasingly marginalized and medicalized. These language ideologies
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14 125 impact revitalisation policies, and as such each of the above groups' motivation to
15
16 126 learn, (re)adopt or keep on signing.

17 127 I will argue that revitalisation policies targeted at sign languages are unbalanced. I
18
19 128 claim this because they seem to be primarily aimed at one specific group of hearing
20
21 129 new signers. Having an intrinsic motivation to sign (many deaf new signers, some
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23 130 hearing new signers like parents of deaf children), seems to be directly opposed to
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25 131 being subject to revitalisation policies. Deaf children, hearing parents, and deaf new
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27 132 signers are often not provided the capacity, opportunity and motivation to learn, use
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29 133 and maintain use of a sign language.

30 134 **2. Data and positionality**

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33 135 Data in this article come from two main sources: preliminary analysis of interviews
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35 136 with 15 deaf and hearing new and traditional signers between the ages of 18 and 62 in
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37 137 Flanders, Belgium, carried out by the author. The second source is participant
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39 138 observation: I have been engaging with SLCs throughout a 20-year period, mostly in
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41 139 my home SLC (Flanders, Belgium) but also in other (mostly European) SLCs. As a
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43 140 consequence, **my arguments are informed by lived experience**, and primarily rooted in
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45 141 the European, and more specifically Belgian, context, but I will also often refer to the
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47 142 U.S. or Canadian contexts, especially when discussing the position of hearing new
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49 143 signers. This is all informed by my own position as a deaf researcher (see also Kusters
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51 144 et al. 2017a) and a 'new signer'. I learned to sign when I was 16, through informal
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53 145 language socialisation in deaf spaces. I did thus not grow up with sign language, nor
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55 146 did I go to a deaf school. Still, I sign with my own children now. This lived
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57 147 experience and positionality as a deaf new signer, parent and researcher informed my
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59 148 own thinking in this domain.

60 149 My position in this article aligns with that of Spolsky (2014, 2017), taking a human
rights or civil rights position towards vitality, seeing it first of all as a matter of social

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3 151 justice. Indeed, the changing sociolinguistic order described above is not a neutral or
4 152 natural phenomenon, but the result of a complex interplay of several societal,
5 153 ideological and political factors. Similarly, language maintenance and revitalisation is
6 154 fundamentally an anthropological, political and economic problem and not a linguistic
7 155 one (Cowell 2016). This article thus also aims to contribute to ‘prior ideological
8 156 clarification’ (Fishman 1991) concerning language revitalisation and answers the call
9 157 to expand theory-building in this domain (Austin and Sallabank 2014). Ideological
10 158 clarification entails going beyond vague terms such as ‘saving the language’ but
11 159 considering questions such as why is language revitalisation desirable, who is it for,
12 160 and who has the authority to decide such questions (Sallabank 2013).

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21 161 I will now introduce the ‘new speaker’ framework, and its applicability to ‘new
22 162 signers’.

23 24 25 26 163 **3. New speakers and new signers**

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29 164 The new speakers concept first emerged in the context of some of Europe’s lesser-
30 165 used languages including Catalan (Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015), Galician (O’Rourke
31 166 and Ramallo 2015) and Irish (O’Rourke and Walsh 2015). One of the rationales for
32 167 the use of the concept was that language revitalisation studies mainly talk about native
33 168 and/or heritage communities and not focus on profiles and practices of speakers who
34 169 emerge outside these communities. Native speakers were often positioned as the
35 170 legitimate representatives of a given speech community. As a consequence new
36 171 speakers were (intentionally or otherwise) largely ignored as a linguistic group,
37 172 despite the fact that they are a necessary part of revitalisation efforts (O’Rourke et al.
38 173 2015). The ‘new speaker’ concept has now become an umbrella term to help
39 174 understand complex speaker profiles which were previously referred to by (now
40 175 increasingly contested) labels such as ‘non-native’, ‘second language’, ‘L2’ speaker,
41 176 etc. These concepts not only described but also delegitimised those speakers, and the
42 177 ‘new speaker’ concept is a clear attempt to move away from those older labels
43 178 (O’Rourke et al. 2015).

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56 179 Different definitions of ‘new speakers’ have been used. One is to refer to “individuals
57 180 with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead
58 181 acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalisation projects
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3 182 or as adult language learners” (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 1). Pujolar and Puigdevall
4 183 (2015: 170), in the context of Catalan, use the concept to refer to “people whose
5 184 language learned in primary socialisation – i.e. with parents or guardians – was not
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7 184 Catalan” and add that in many cases the adjective ‘new’ may be misleading, given that
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9 185 many of the people they refer to as ‘new speakers’ have been Catalan speakers for
10 186 many years. In the context of Galician, the term has been used to describe a type of
11 187 speaker “who was not brought up speaking the minority language but who adopted
12 188 Galician language practices as adolescents or as young adults” (O’Rourke et al. 2015:
13 189 4).
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20 191 None of these existing definitions are tailor-made for the situation of SLCs and new
21 192 signers. Firstly, this is because for SLCs the concept entails both deaf and hearing new
22 193 signers. This already adds several layers of complexity because as I will demonstrate,
23 194 compared to most hearing signers, many deaf signers have a different acquisition and
24 195 learning path, and a different degree of access to both signed and spoken languages.
25 196 Secondly, and in line with a social justice view on language revitalisation, I want to
26 197 take into account the specific situation of deaf children and their (mostly hearing)
27 198 parents. Because of the negative ideologies described above, they are currently very
28 199 much at a disadvantage in terms of access to sign languages. McKee (2011: 288) for
29 200 example observed that in New Zealand, “it is easier for an undergraduate student [...] to
30 201 learn NZSL for interest as part of their bachelor’s degree than for the parents of a
31 202 deaf pre-schooler to access regular tuition in NZSL [...]”. This inclusion of children is
32 203 a divergence from most new speakers research, which primarily addresses adults (but
33 204 see Costa 2014).

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39 205 Moreover, “people categories [like ‘new speaker’ or ‘new signer’] are the ones that
40 206 ‘travel’ most easily outside academic discourses and into public debates and
41 207 governmental procedures that may be consequential for specific social groups” (Heller
42 208 et al. 2018: 108). This means I will try to avoid precise definitions of who exactly
43 209 qualifies as ‘new signer’ or ‘traditional signer’, but will use ‘new signers’ as a
44 210 permeable broad label or lens that can be used to focus on many different profiles that
45 211 exist in parallel. Apart from this, it is important to understand that the division
46 212 between traditional and new speakers/signers is not only characterised by their
47 213 different language learning trajectories but also by their social profiles and, in the case
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3 214 of signers, by their sensory asymmetries – it is thus about much more than just
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5 215 ‘linguistic’ differences.
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8 216 The use of the new speaker concept aligns with a broader biographical approach
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10 217 within research on multilingualism (cf. Busch 2015): it does not take individual
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12 218 languages or varieties as its starting point, but the experiencing multilingual subject
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14 219 with his or her multi-layered linguistic repertoire (Kramersch 2009). This is all framed
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16 220 within a context where the very notion of ‘nativeness’ and ‘native speaker’ is
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18 221 increasingly being contested (Bonfiglio 2013; Liddicoat 2016), the definition and
19
20 222 demarcation of languages is itself debated, and language is increasingly seen as a
21
22 223 practice as opposed to its linguistic form (Makoni and Pennycook 2005). O’Rourke
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24 224 and Ramallo (2013: 289) state “this prompts us to turn our attention to the in-between
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26 225 spaces that such practices generate”, spaces that have often been ignored in previous
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28 226 (socio)linguistic discussion. This is also true for most sign language research, where
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30 227 attention has often been directed to languages instead of practices (Kusters et al.
31
32 228 2017b), and where the notion of ‘nativeness’ and its underlying ideological
33
34 229 connotations has only recently become under scrutiny (Costello et al. 2008; Jaeger
35
36 230 2017; Napier and Leeson 2016). Johnston’s (2006) vitality predictions for Australian
37
38 231 Sign Language for example were mainly based on evaluations about the existence (or
39
40 232 not) of a ‘core’ deaf community consisting of “deaf native signers”, stating there is
41
42 233 “no known way that the continued aging and shrinking of a linguistic community
43
44 234 without replacement by younger native users can support a viable language beyond
45
46 235 the life spans of the current majority cohort, despite all the goodwill in the world”
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48 236 (Johnston 2006: 165).
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238 **4. An unbalanced revitalisation**

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50 240 Language revitalisation can be viewed as a form of language policy that seeks to halt
51
52 241 and reverse language shift (Lewis and Royles 2017). This will occur, it is stated, when
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54 242 policy interventions successfully address a range of factors that influence a language’s
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56 243 level of ‘vitality’, where vitality is demonstrated by the extent that the language is
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58 244 used as a means of communication in various social contexts for specific purposes.
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3 245 The most prominent of these factors are demographic, sociolinguistic, political-
4 246 institutional, economic, psychological and linguistic factors (Edwards 1992).
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8 248 Concerning the vitality of sign languages, recent research has pointed to the status of
9 249 most Western sign languages currently being endangered. This is especially the case in
10 250 countries with smaller populations, universal new-born hearing screening and state-
11 251 funded cochlear implants (McKee and Smiler 2017). Most imminently endangered are
12 252 isolated village sign languages and small territorial sign languages. But even larger
13 253 national sign languages have been rated as ‘unsafe/vulnerable’ in the UNESCO
14 254 Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire, which was adapted for sign
15 255 languages (Safar and Webster 2014; UNESCO 2003). On the adapted EGIDS
16 256 (Bickford et al. 2015), New Zealand Sign Language, as of yet the only sign language
17 257 in the world with status as an official national language, has been categorised at level
18 258 6b: “used for face-to-face communication within all generations but losing users”
19 259 (McKee 2017).
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31 261 The statement that sign languages are ‘endangered’ and thus need to be ‘revitalised’ is
32 262 in itself an ideological position which needs to be acknowledged and clarified, both
33 263 with regard to what exactly is ‘endangered’ and as a consequence, what needs to be
34 264 ‘revitalised’ and ‘maintained’. I argue that by talking about the ‘endangerment’ of
35 265 sign languages it is first of all their use by deaf people, in ‘deaf spaces’, that is
36 266 endangered – I will posit that their use by hearing people in non-deaf spaces is not
37 267 endangered, but even promoted. This means that ‘prior ideological clarification’ in
38 268 this case means that what needs to be revitalised and maintained is the use of sign
39 269 languages by deaf people, and that revitalisation only targeted at hearing people is
40 270 unbalanced.
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50 272 **5. Profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new signers, hearing new signers, and** 51 273 **deaf and hearing children**

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54 274 I will now provide a first sketch of the profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new
55 275 signers, hearing new signers, and deaf and hearing children, and compare this with
56 276 some of what is known about ‘new speakers’. For the ‘new signers’ profiles, it is
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3 277 difficult to say how much and how many factors are constituent of a specific profile:
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5 278 in a sense, ‘new signers’ is a permeable broad label or lens that can be used to focus
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7 279 on many different profiles that exist in parallel.
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10 280 5.1. Deaf traditional signers

- 11
12 281 • Deaf traditional signers are biased towards the older age groups. They have
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14 282 acquired sign language via peer transmission in a residential deaf school
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16 283 context or a day school context, being exposed to sign language when
17
18 284 commuting to and from a deaf school. A minority have acquired sign language
19
20 285 in the home context. They are often seen (by deaf and hearing new signers) as
21
22 286 using ‘true’ or ‘pure’ sign language, i.e. using linguistic items consistent with
23
24 287 some ideological standard of ‘authentic’ sign language use (Hill 2013): for
25
26 288 example more use of classifiers, visual imagery, non-manual signals, lesser
27
28 289 extent of spoken language word order and mouthing, less initialized signs, and
29
30 290 less contact features from spoken languages or other sign languages (in a
31
32 291 European context, mainly American Sign Language or International Sign).
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34 292
- 35 293 • Historicity is important for understanding traditional signers’ experiences.
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37 294 Many did not consciously ‘decide’ to sign, because the deaf school context in
38
39 295 many cases automatically ‘gave’ them sign language (by contact with deaf
40
41 296 peers). This does not mean that it came natural to them or that they were given
42
43 297 free access to sign languages: many have physically or mentally been punished
44
45 298 for signing (Ladd 2003) and many of them have never received an education in
46
47 299 or about sign language. While they could sign in some specific spaces in the
48
49 300 deaf schools (e.g. the dorms and playgrounds) during the years of strict oralist
50
51 301 policies (from approximately 1880 to 1980) when most traditional signers went
52
53 302 to school, signing was forbidden in most European deaf schools.
54
55 303
- 56 304 • Traditional signers’ perception of hearing signing people might be influenced
57
58 305 by the time in which they grew up; a time when sign languages were still in-
59
60 306 group languages and few hearing people could sign. For example, many of
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308 308 them are still astonished to meet hearing people who can sign, especially
hearing children; some traditional signers might cope with feelings of guilt or

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3 309 regret because not having signed with their (hearing or even deaf) children
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5 310 when they were small - because they were being advised against it, internalised
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7 311 negative ideologies about it (for example in a deaf school context being
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9 312 exposed to the ideology that sign language is not a 'real' language), or just
10
11 313 didn't know it was überhaupt possible.
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13 314

14 315 5.2. Deaf new signers

16 316 Deaf new signers are not 'new' to SLCs. The historical pattern whereby deaf people
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18 317 who did not grow up using sign language will adopt sign language (or re-adopt in case
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20 318 they had some exposure as a child) as a teenager, adolescent or adult when finding a
21
22 319 deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs (Carty 2006; Johnston 2006; Ladd
23
24 320 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016). At the same time, this also highlights the problematic
25
26 321 assumption (mostly by hearing parents of deaf children) that an adult sign language
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28 322 collective "will autonomously sustain itself as a cultural resource to be discovered
29
30 323 later in life" (McKee 2017: 344).

31 324 The importance of deaf new signers for vitality should not be underestimated (Carty
32
33 325 2006). McKee (2017) interviewed young NZSL "L2 users" (15-29 years old), and
34
35 326 argues that they compromise a critical cohort for predicting future sign language
36
37 327 vitality. Indeed, many of them acquire sign language later in life when they seek out a
38
39 328 deaf peer group by going to a deaf club or deaf events "and may explore language
40
41 329 identity choices different from those initially presented to them by their parents" (p.
42
43 330 337).

44 331 The group of deaf new signers is very varied. It includes, among others, deaf people
45
46 332 who learn sign language in their (young) adolescence through peer contact, for
47
48 333 example by going to a deaf club or deaf events, or deaf people who have been exposed
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50 334 to sign language in their childhood (e.g. by starting school in a deaf school) but have
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52 335 'lost' the language during secondary school (mainstreaming) and re-adopt it in their
53
54 336 teenage years/young adolescence. For many of them however, the adjective 'new' is a
55
56 337 misnomer because they have been signing for many years. Their language trajectory
57
58 338 and socioeconomic background however is often distinct from that of traditional
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60 339 signers – they are often multilingual and mobile, and higher educated. The group also
60 340 includes deaf people who learn sign language through formal lessons, deaf people

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3 341 who self-report first having used various forms of ‘Sign Supported English’ and later
4 342 shift to ‘sign language’ (which is itself an profoundly ideological stance) (e.g. Weber
5 343 forthcoming), and deafened people who learn how to sign.

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9 344 Despite the high diversity within this group, there are a few factors that many deaf
10 345 new signers seem to have in common (and also have in common with new speakers of
11 346 spoken minority languages):

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15 347 • The majority begin to acquire sign language outside the home or deaf school
16 348 context – many acquire passive or active competency through informal
17 349 language socialisation which can (partly) take place in ‘traditional’ spaces such
18 350 as deaf clubs.
- 19 351 • Some have acquired a spoken language first, so the ‘new’ is not only linked to
20 352 the adoption of a new language but also a new modality (spoken and then
21 353 signed).
- 22
23 354 • Many deaf new signers share stories of *rites de passage* in becoming a new
24 355 signer, for example becoming acquainted with a specific deaf adult who acted
25 356 as a deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’ to them when they first joined deaf spaces
26 357 (Sutton-Spence 2010).
- 27
28
29 358 • Many can point to one or more stages across their life trajectory at which a
30 359 (sudden or gradual) transformation of their linguistic practices occurred, which
31 360 brought about a reorganisation of their linguistic repertoires and as such also a
32 361 new form of self-representation. This has many interesting links with the
33 362 linguistic *mudes* concept in new speakers research (Pujolar & Puigdevall 2015;
34 363 Puigdevall et al. 2018). For deaf new signers, these biographical junctures can
35 364 be for example entering specific (sometimes traditional) deaf spaces and being
36 365 exposed to sign language and deaf ways of being, going to university and
37 366 having a sign language interpreter or meeting other deaf students, meeting a
38 367 deaf or signing partner, or starting to work at a deaf workplace. Just as with
39 368 linguistic *mudes* for new speakers, for new signers this “is not only a change of
40 369 language [...] but a change in the way one organises language choice in
41 370 everyday life”, which can be “triggered by language ideologies and fuelled by
42 371 different motivations” (Puigdevall et al. 2018: 2). For deaf signers, these

1
2
3 372 motivations can be the desire to belong (to a deaf peer group), find their ‘deaf
4 identity’, or to live without (or with less) communication problems. Language
5 373 ideologies can be for example the wish to shift from SSE to sign language (e.g.
6
7 374 Weber forthcoming).
8
9 375

10
11 376 • For many deaf new signers, transition into *new signerness* is a very affective
12 process fraught with emotions (cf. Walsh 2017 for emotions and new
13 377 speakerness and Kramersch 2009 for the affective aspect of learning new
14 378 languages) and can be very confusing. Many have been exposed to negative
15 379 ideologies about sign languages and signing deaf people in their childhood,
16 380 some have traumatic childhood experiences including language deprivation,
17 381 isolation from peers in mainstream schools (some being deliberately kept from
18 382 meeting other deaf children) and undergoing CI surgery they did not consent
19 383 to. When they finally arrive in deaf spaces, many feel an overwhelming sense
20 384 of sameness and happiness, sometimes described as moving from darkness to
21 385 light (Padden and Humphries 1988) and using imagery such as ‘home’ and
22 386 ‘family’ (Lane et al. 1996). This is often experienced as transformational, and
23 387 paired with learning about deaf ways of being (Ladd 1979, 2003; Swinbourne
24 388 2015; Weber forthcoming).
25 389

26
27 390 • While generally not being physically punished for using sign language, for
28 391 many deaf new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy:
29 392 many experience rejection, both by hearing people (for example their friends or
30 393 family members, who do not understand the changes in their linguistic
31 394 practices) as well as by some deaf people, who might (initially) describe them
32 395 as ‘oral’, ‘hard of hearing’, ‘not deaf enough’ or ‘cultural interlopers’ because
33 396 of their linguistic and cultural background and language use (Napier and
34 397 Leeson 2016; Weber forthcoming).

35
36 398 • Because of their distinct background (higher educated, mobile), some deaf new
37 399 signers are perceived (by traditional signers and also sometimes other deaf new
38 400 signers) as representing ‘new’ sign language (i.e. not authentic) with more
39 401 contact features from spoken languages (e.g. different/more mouthing patterns)
40 402 and other sign languages, mainly International Sign and American Sign

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3 403 Language, and less modality-specific aspects that traditional signers use.
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8 405 5.3. Hearing new signers 9

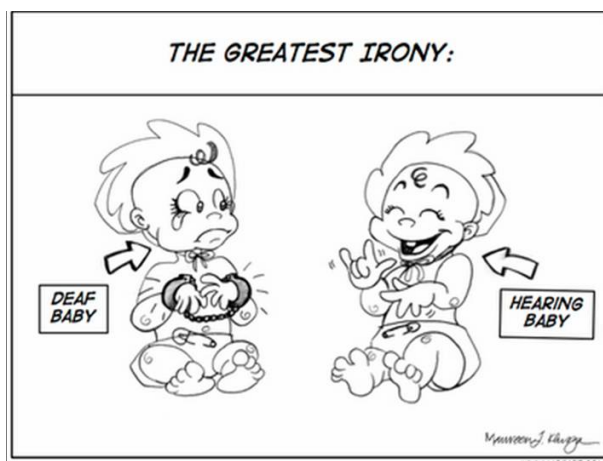
10 406 The group of hearing new signers is equally diverse and does not constitute one
11 407 specific profile. It consists of two main groups. The first groups are so-called NERDs
12 408 (Not Even Related to Deaf)⁴. Those people often do not have actual contact with deaf
13 409 people and/or do not use sign language outside of the classroom context. Up till now,
14 410 NERDs are mostly found in U.S. and Canadian contexts, where they learn to sign in
15 411 high schools, colleges, or online through apps (see for example <http://theaslapp.com/>).
16 412 As will be seen in section 6.1, their position in terms of motivation is often perceived
17 413 as controversial by deaf people.
18
19

20 414 **The group of hearing new signers** also includes people who *are* related in some way to
21 415 deaf people, e.g. partners, friends, family, colleagues, and parents of deaf children and
22 416 whose motivation to sign is often different than that of NERDs. Just like many deaf
23 417 new signers, they can point to a life event which reorganised their linguistic
24 418 repertoires and at which *mudes* took place (Puigdevall et al. 2018). For many of them,
25 419 this happened when become a parent, friend, or couple.
26
27

28 420 5.4. Deaf and hearing children and hearing parents 29

30 421 In the U.S., with increased public acceptance of ASL and the popularity of *Baby*
31 422 *Signs*, the most significant group now generally *not* offered the opportunity to learn to
32 423 sign from birth are deaf children who receive CIs (Neidle and Nash 2015). Deaf
33 424 cartoonist Maureen Klusza in her well-known cartoon (see Figure 1) called this the
34 425 “greatest irony”: that despite the large amount of research showing the benefits of sign
35 426 language for hearing babies, deaf babies are not allowed to sign.
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54 ⁴ It seems the NERD concept appeared in the U.S. around the same time other acronyms like
55 CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) and SODA (Sibling of Deaf Adult) were beginning to be
56 used (mid to late 1980s). While SODA was used in a more serious way, NERD was used
57 more humorously, as a form of self-identification primarily used by sign language
58 interpreters. I have chosen to use the concept here because it is a suitable acronym in this
59 context.
60



427
428 Figure 1: The greatest irony (cartoon by Maureen Klusza)

429 McKee & Smiler (2017: 51) observe that New Zealand is witnessing “a decline of
430 incentive, opportunity, and context for young deaf children to acquire NZSL”.

431 Hearing parents who want to become and remain new signers must overcome
432 significant obstacles caused by powerful ideological triggers, e.g. the ideology that
433 signing will hamper their child’s spoken language development (Humphries et al.
434 2017).

435 On the other hand, there seem to be an increasing number of hearing children who
436 sign. Most of them have deaf parents, of whom some are new signers themselves (not
437 having acquired sign language from *their* parents), and some of them are hearing new
438 signers, e.g. in the case of mixed deaf-hearing couples.

439 6. So, why do you sign? Deaf and hearing new signers and motivation

440 6.1. NERDs

441 The increasing number of NERDs learning to sign is generally applauded by deaf
442 people because they are seen as helpful to expand domains of use beyond existing
443 speaker base, and as such assist with heightening public visibility. In advocacy
444 contexts, their estimated number is often added to that of deaf signers, to help increase
445 (or inflate) numbers for political reasons, e.g. the advancement of sign language
446 rights. NERDs’ contribution to vitality is thus often discussed in instrumental terms
447 and appreciated for instrumental reasons.

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2
3 448 Regarding motivation however, they take up a more controversial position. Deaf
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5 449 people have expressed concerns that many of those NERDs are not capable of
6
7 450 carrying on a conversation with a deaf person, never get to meet deaf people and that
8
9 451 the increasing number of NERDs is not leading to any tangible benefits for deaf
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11 452 people. Their motivation is sometimes perceived (rightly or not) as chiefly
12
13 453 instrumental (an easy way to get course credits), or out of a strangely exotic interest in
14
15 454 sign language. For ASL in postsecondary education, Snoddon (2016) notes it is
16
17 455 difficult to assess what return is made (if any) to SLCs themselves beyond
18
19 456 employment of deaf ASL instructors. In New Zealand, McKee (2017) found that 80%
20
21 457 of deaf people she surveyed knew fewer than 10 hearing people capable of a ‘decent
22
23 458 conversation’ in NZSL, and many of these were interpreters. There is often the
24
25 459 concern that NERDs are only interested to learn the signs for specific words, without
26
27 460 interest in the cultural context (Ellcessor 2015). This brings up questions regarding
28
29 461 ‘token maintenance’, which has also been discussed in revitalisation literature more
30
31 462 generally (Thieberger 2002).

32
33 463 Also, in a Canadian context, Snoddon (2016) argues that while the teaching of
34
35 464 indigenous languages is tied and directed to their communities of origin, the perceived
36
37 465 value of the teaching of ASL “rests on its learning by dominant-culture speakers rather
38
39 466 than being tied to the language revitalisation efforts of cultural minorities” (p. 1-2),
40
41 467 primarily sign language rights for deaf children. Consequently, she calls for more
42
43 468 consideration of how these ASL classes can effectively support revitalisation: e.g. by
44
45 469 including employment of deaf ASL signers as instructors, student field placement in
46
47 470 schools, agencies, churches and related sites where interaction with and service to
48
49 471 local deaf communities may take place (p. 10).

50
51 472 Another controversial aspect of some NERDs’ motivations is that some take economic
52
53 473 advantage from learning sign language without engaging with deaf people or, if they
54
55 474 do, mostly foregrounding their own position. There are a multitude of music videos
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57 475 available on the Internet with NERDs trying to get their place in the spotlights. Baby
58
59 476 Signs courses are a booming business and often taught by hearing people, some of
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477 whom not fluent in sign language (Snoddon 2014). Hollywood movies cast hearing
478 actors who learn some signs for deaf roles (diMarco 2017). These practices have

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2
3 479 sparked debates about representation, cultural appropriation, loss of ownership and
4 480 authenticity and linguistic prescriptivism and purism (see e.g. Snoddon 2016).

7 481 Summarized, for many NERDs, using sign language comes with certain economic,
8 482 but also personal and ideological rewards: by using sign language they are seen as
9 483 contributing to “inclusion”, “feel-good diversity”, and taking an advocacy stance
12 484 (“showing up for the deaf community”).

15 485 6.2. Deaf new signers and hearing signers related to deaf people

18 486 Many deaf new signers, following their distinct childhood experiences, often make an
19 487 active decision to acquire competence in sign language as an act of identity or for
20 488 ideological or political reasons (cf. Walsh and Murchadha 2014 for new speakers).

23 489 Many want to learn sign language to be able to socialize with other deaf people and
24 490 learn about deaf ways of being. John Walker, in the movie ‘Found’, talks about how
25 491 he met his (hearing, non-signing) parents after his first actual stay with deaf peers at a
26 492 summer camp. They came to pick him up, and when they arrived he signed to them
27 493 where the car park was, to which his mother said “don’t sign!”. John: “I walked over
28 494 to where they’d parked and knocked on the window. [...] I said “Mum, the people I’ve
29 495 met here are really lovely. Maybe we don’t need to sign, and that’s fine. But they sign
30 496 and I want to sign with them. So I will sign – OK?” (Swinbourne 2015).

37 497 The motivation of the group of hearing new signers who are related to deaf people is
38 498 often taken for granted, although it has not garnered significant research attention yet -
39 499 apart from accounts of hearing parents’ barriers to learn to sign (e.g. West 2013 and
40 500 the online community <http://www.whysisign.com/>, which is exactly about motivation).
41 501 Often, those people have an intrinsic motivation to sign – to communicate with their
42 502 deaf family member, friend, colleague and are actively looking at opportunities and
43 503 contexts to learn and use sign language.

45 504 Negative ideologies towards the use of sign language by deaf signers, and some
46 505 hearing signers like parents however, lead to a lack of revitalisation policies for this
47 506 group. Many deaf children and hearing parents are discouraged from signing, and
48 507 many deaf new signers need to find their way to sign language on their own.

58 508 **7. Conclusion**

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3 509 In this article I have introduced a new sociolinguistic order in SLCs, exploring the
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5 510 profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new signers, hearing new signers and deaf and
6
7 511 hearing children, and discussed the motivation of deaf and hearing new signers.
8
9 512 Contributing to ‘ideological clarification’, I have argued that the ‘endangerment’ of
10
11 513 sign languages primarily concerns threats to their use by deaf people, while hearing
12
13 514 people, especially NERDs, seem to have greater access to sign languages than ever
14
15 515 before. The different motivations of those groups link to different language ideologies
16
17 516 and revitalisation policies to which those groups are subject to. Having an intrinsic
18
19 517 motivation to sign seems to be directly opposed to being subject to revitalisation
20
21 518 policies, while having a more instrumental motivation is often being rewarded in
22
23 519 various ways.

24
25 520 By using a ‘new signer lens to look at language trajectories and backgrounds of deaf
26
27 521 and hearing signers, I have argued for looking at choice, ideological stance, and
28
29 522 motivation as factors in predicting vitality – not whether someone is ‘native’ or not
30
31 523 (cf. Cowell 2016). It is critical that more research attention is directed towards the
32
33 524 motivation of each of these groups. This brings up several questions for future
34
35 525 research directions. How can we work to re-balance revitalisation policies targeted at
36
37 526 sign languages, by ensuring that *all* of these groups have the desire and motivation to
38
39 527 adopt a sign language in their linguistic repertoires? If deaf children with CIs have the
40
41 528 choice not to sign (because having access to other, more dominant languages), and
42
43 529 their parents are being discouraged from it, how can we work to give them capacity,
44
45 530 ample opportunities, and motivation to sign? How can legislation and policies support
46
47 531 both deaf new signers’ multilingualism and their motivation to sign? For NERDs, how
48
49 532 can we work to ensure their language practices go beyond token maintenance and are
50
51 533 of interest to SLCs’ revitalisation agendas? How can we guarantee that the positive
52
53 534 ideologies directed towards NERDs are extended to deaf signers’ language practices?

54
55 535 A better understanding of the profiles, language practices and motivations of each of
56
57 536 these groups will be instrumental for developing evidence-based sign language
58
59 537 policies for the future.

60
538 **Acknowledgments**

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Response to reviewer

Thank you for the additional comments on the manuscript. Below, I have responded to each comment – the reviewer’s comment is in black font; my response is in blue font, changes I quote from the revised manuscript are in orange. Page and line numbers refer to the revised manuscript. In the manuscript, I have highlighted in yellow where changes have been made or text has been added, and in green where text has been moved.

Comment 1:

“De Meulder & Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also language revitalization. Bauman & Murray (2017: 252) mention the parallel “dissemination” and “decimation” of ASL use and state that “if we include family members and sign language students, it is likely that a majority of those who know national sign languages are now hearing, not deaf”.

=> I think this needs more explanation in the paragraph itself. Or you could move it down a few paragraphs so that it’s more clear what is meant.

I have moved this paragraph to p. 3 lines 79–85. After the reference to De Meulder & Murray (2017) I have also added a brief explanation. This now reads: De Meulder and Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also language revitalization, since the expanding pool of ‘new signers’ can serve to sustain the existence of sign languages.

Comment 2:

Page 22: Re the two paragraphs about negative vs positive ideologies. Which ideologies are positive vs negative are a valuation by researchers in themselves (and this valuation is ideological in itself). Also ideologies that are very different are grouped together here, as “negative”, in a simplistic way. Alternatively, you could say what the ideologies are and what the result is (eg “ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages”), rather than categorizing them as neg or pos.

I think the reviewer means p. 4 lines 106–119 in the first revision? Thank you for this comment, this was indeed an ideological evaluation. In line 108 I have deleted ‘negative’ and changed to ‘specific’ ideologies, and explained them as ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages. In line 116 I have left out ‘positive’ and changed to ‘a different set of ideologies’. These paragraphs now read:

Motivations are directly tied to language ideologies (Rosa and Burdick 2016). Sign languages and the people who use them are currently the object of specific ideologies (Hill 2013; Krausneker 2015), which drive revitalisation policies. The use of sign languages by deaf adults, hearing parents of deaf children and especially deaf children themselves are often the target of ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages. For them, sign languages are questioned as languages per se, seen as compensations for hearing loss or incompetency to acquire a spoken language, and seen as a hampering deaf children’s spoken language development (Humphries et al. 2017).

At the same time a different set of ideologies, mostly linked to their use by and exposure to hearing people, give many sign languages prestige: for example, they are seen as beneficial for hearing babies to communicate their needs more efficiently before their spoken language develops, are used in video games, apps, television series, movies, sports events, children

songs, Disney commercials, and are gaining popularity on other cultural, artistic and commercial scenes.

Comment 3:

“have been a participant observer throughout a 20-year period,” => rephrase? participant observation is a term specific to ethnographic research methodologies. It implies focusing on a particular set of themes and making field notes. Rather, you could say that your research is informed by “lived experience” rather than that you were “participant observer”.

I have deleted “have been a participant observer” and added “lived experience” (line 140). This now reads: “I have been engaging with SLCs throughout a 20-year period, mostly in my home SLC (Flanders, Belgium) but also in other (mostly European) SLCs. As a consequence, my arguments are informed by lived experience, and primarily rooted in the European, and more specifically Belgian, context [...]”

Comment 4:

“as a teenager or young adolescent when finding a deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs “ => always? Can you be more specific as to what kind of evidence there is? Also, can you broaden this to adults in general? Eg Pierre Desloges’ work on the pre-school Parisian deaf community: Desloges himself learned as an adult rather than an adolescent. Being 18+ means more freedom to move towards deaf spaces.

I have added a few references to support this statement: Johnston 2006; Ladd 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016, and I have broadened the statement to adults (lines 318–320): The historical pattern whereby deaf people who did not grow up using sign language will adopt sign language (or re-adopt in case they had some exposure as a child) as a teenager, adolescent or adult when finding a deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs (Carty 2006; Johnston 2006; Ladd 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016).

Comment 5:

“many of them acquire sign language later in adolescence” change into “later in life”? adolescence only refers to the age group 15-18 I think? (while eg “youth” is broader and in deaf contexts seems to refer to age 16-30/35)

Has been changed to “later in life” (line 327).

Comment 6:

“are often skilled visual communicators,” => Refer to literature on deaf people’s being “visual”, even deaf people who have been mainstreamed? Lipreading, written language, cued speech etc. are visual...

I agree this is claim is unclear. I think the observation still stands, but I can’t really support the claim. I have left it out. So this is now only (lines 351–353): Some have acquired a spoken language first, so the ‘new’ is not only linked to the adoption of a new language but also a new modality (spoken and then signed).

Comment 7:

“with a specific deaf adult who acted as a ‘deaf parent’ “ => is “role model” a better word here? Often, these people seem to be peers who are slightly older, rather than a full generation older.

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3 For me it is not just a role model, but someone who watches over them, guards them. You are
4 right the generational difference does not always apply. I have left out ‘parent’ and changed
5 to “deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’” (line 359): “... for example becoming acquainted with a
6 specific deaf adult who acted as a deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’ to them when they first
7 joined deaf spaces (Sutton-Spence 2010).”
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10 Comment 8:

11 “many deaf new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy: many
12 experience rejection,” => rejection of their language use? Their new identity? Rejected as a
13 person?
14

15 I have tried to make this clearer by adding some clarification (lines 392–396). This now
16 reads: While generally not being physically punished for using sign language, for many deaf
17 new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy: many experience
18 rejection, both by hearing people (for example their friends or family members, who do not
19 understand the changes in their linguistic practices) as well as by some deaf people, who
20 might (initially) describe them as ‘oral’, ‘hard of hearing’, ‘not deaf enough’ or ‘cultural
21 interlopers’ because of their linguistic and cultural background and language use (Napier and
22 Leeson 2016; Weber forthcoming).
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26 Comment 9:

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28 “This group also includes people who are related “=> “this” is confusing here, I first thought
29 you meant the NERDs (and I thought it was NERDAs rather than NERDs?
30

31 “This” refers to the group of hearing new signers. I have changed accordingly (line 414):
32 “The group of hearing signers also includes people who *are* related in some way...”
33

34 The original concept as found in U.S. discourses and publications is NERD(s), not
35 NERDA(s). Friedner (2018) for some reason added the “A” but does not explain why.
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