



The sign language interpreting for academic purposes: social, functional level in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Our text is an attempt to describe the academic field of Greek sign language interpreting in a country in which sign language is not recognized as a minority language and in which there are no translation studies paradigms for the formation of sign language interpretation. In this context it is particular relevant that scholars, trainers and practitioners with commitment to civil society actors which have a long way to cross towards creating the civil and political conditions for the recognition of the role of sign language interpreters equivalent to all other interpreters in the labor market in Greece and to develop productive models of co- existence between voluntarism and labor institutions that respond not only to the need of an ethically oriented approach to sign language interpretation but also to a social collaboration addressed to the emerging linguistic community of the deaf on an academic and social level.

Key words

Minority language, Greek sign language, interpreting, deaf, TS paradigms

The sign language interpreting in Greece

Our paper is aiming to describe how groups of handicap such as the deaf and hard hearing experience the fact that from the linguistic, cultural and civil point of view, Greece which is a European, country is not yet ready to recognize the Greek sign language as a minority language. In this context we shall analyze how the involvement of Greek sign language interpreters in the complex Greek academic field is becoming a growing concern for the Greek ethics of sign language interpreting; providing in the platform of this 1st International Forum the elements for the debate on the urgent issue of sign language interpreting and activism among scholars, trainers, practitioners and civil society actors in European countries.

Sign language, with the Recommendation 1598 (2003), has acquired, from the Council of Europe, the status of a minority language. To understand the a. political aspects and b. the principles of action of Greek sign language interpreting, we have to discuss how these two basic factors have been approached in our country.

Main political aspects:

The Greek sign language, under the law 2817/2000 has been recognized in Greece as an official language for the deaf but not yet as a minority language. Deaf students are enrolled, according to the law 2909/2001, in the higher education but there is no law to define a. the modalities of the access of the deaf students to the every day duree of the academic context and b. the principles for the selection of their interpreters [volunteer or not]. Academic institutions specialized in the formation of interpreters, organizations of Greek sign language interpreters and the deaf have not yet made a political commitment in order to function politically in the social frame of the interpreting of a minority language. Moreover, the paradigm for the formation of Greek sign language hearing speakers and interpreters is the didactic paradigm of the pedagogic departments specialised in the education of the handicap, very distant from the translation studies paradigm for the formation of interpreters

The principles governing Greek sign language interpreting services:

The prevalent paradigms and models for the diffusion of Greek sign language interpreting as a political practice are the social welfare paradigms and sign interpreters which are not formed in the frame of the academic formation of translators and interpreters as professional actors.

Concerning the public life in Greece, sign language interpreters have recently become more common and they appear more frequently in civil and social life. Twenty years ago there was only one sign language interpreter in the state television channel. At this moment almost all television channels have a short briefing for deaf citizens in the Greek Sign Language each afternoon.

In the Greek Parliament since 2000 interpreting is provided every time there is a statement by the Prime Minister, or a matter that concerns all the country like education, health, or the social security system.

Since last year the political parties have started to collaborate with sign language interpreters in the gatherings of candidates for the local or national elections. Furthermore, in the big municipalities of the country in some events, like Christmas or New Year's Eve, the authorities arrange so that the program is also possible to be followed in sign language.

In the public sector there is no available list of authorized sign language interpreters and for this reason there is no possibility for the members of the Greek sign language minority to order through appointment any official sign language interpreting service. For example if a deaf citizen wishes to visit a hospital, the internal revenue service or even the municipality authorities in order to ask for a certificate, he/she is obliged to bring along an interpreter paid by him/

her. The above services seldom take responsibility to arrange for interpreting services, even after an appointment has been arranged.

The Greek Federation of the Deaf offers a benefit equivalent to 5-10 hours of sign language interpreting services per month for any deaf citizen. In this framework any interpreting order is communicated to the Greek Federation of the Deaf through fax two days before the appointment.

Usually the Greek Federation of the Deaf pays the interpreters once every six months or every three months through a budget under state approval. This can sometimes lead to more delayed payments and also to a second job. In the event that the allocated by the Federation hours have been used then the interpreting services are paid by the deaf citizen.

In addition, no public service undertakes the payment of the interpreting of sign language except for some cases like a hospital where the Social Welfare Services will be sensitized and provide the corresponding cost.

Very recently the Greek Ministry of Education has approved a specific pricing rate concerning the interpreting services in the Greek sign language. Thus for an hour of private interpretation in a private or public service the interpreter gets paid 25 euros per hour on Mondays through Fridays and for weekends 30 euros per hour. Immediately comes the question whether a deaf citizen, who has used the allocated free interpreting from the Federation and needs an interpreter for 5 or 6 hours, will be charged with the amount of 150 euros, an amount which is too high for the earnings of a deaf citizen especially in Greece since their education does not allow them to climb to the highest paid professions.

We have discussed the politically engaged initiatives in the Greek sign language interpreting field across civil society, private and public labor market. We shall demonstrate that these initiatives do not respond to the need for a linguistic minority oriented approach to interpreting.

The deaf students in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki [AUTh].

In the academic year 2006-2007 we have had the enrollment of 10 deaf students/150students with various disabilities. The A.U.Th. provides interpreters of sign language for the deaf students.

From 2003 until today:

- The A.U.T.H. assists the deaf students with volunteer sign language interpreters.
- The number of interpreters from 2003 to today is 20 and they have volunteered to mediate for six students until now.

- The amount of money for the volunteer interpretation of sign language is about 5 euro per hour. In Thessaloniki the lowest price of professional sign language interpreting service is 20 euro per hour (this is the price for the payment of the sign language interpreter for the teaching of the volunteer in the interpreting interdepartmental class). The lowest price for foreign language lessons in Greek private schools is 8 euro per hour.

There is no quality assessment of the status and quality of the volunteer interpreters across the various academic contexts of their practice as the interpreting tasks are undertaken by the secretary of the Social Policy Committee with no authorization by the law to select and evaluate the volunteers according to the needs of the deaf students.

The interests, beliefs and social factors that mobilize the professional Greek sign language interpreters to express themselves against the institutions of volunteer Greek sign language interpreters for academic purposes are motivated by the need for a more stable professional role. The professional role of the sign language interpreters in Greece depends directly on the recognition of the Greek sign language minority and not on the elimination of the volunteer interpreters in our University.

The formation of sign language volunteer interpreters in Aristotle University

There is only a one-semester undergraduate course on sign language interpreting offered to hearing university students, independent of the subject of their study, who already have a high competence in Greek sign language. This course aims at training the hearing students as community interpreters of the sign language in higher education and where and when it is possible as school interpreters. The course is offered by two teachers [one specialized in TS and the other specialized in general sign language interpreting].

The role and the profile of the volunteer interpreters in AUTH

- The volunteer interpreters mediate in interpretations without being paid; almost daily they come in contact with users of sign language, either in associations for the deaf or by having deaf people as their friends.
- All volunteers are informed about the digital dictionaries which are available in the market.
- The volunteer interpreters of the Social Policy Committee are either students of Humanities and Social Sciences or graduates of the Department of Psychology or other Philological Departments.

- They attend courses for the interpretation of sign language in private institutions which specialize in training for the interpretation of sign language [the volunteers' training lasted from 2 to 4 years].
- What is of special interest is the case of volunteers who study in Foreign Language Departments [such as the English Department] and are trained in sign language, become friends with deaf people, offer private English lessons to deaf students for 15 Euros per hour [the payment of the volunteer interpreters in Aristotle University is 5 Euros per hour]. This category of volunteers is informed about the printed and digitalized material, available in the market in the form of digital dictionaries as well as in printed form. They are interested in being trained through seminars for the International Sign Language offered by the association for the deaf in Thessaloniki.

In Greece there are no professional associations, training institutions and communities of sign language interpreters involved in a political and social movement for the recognition of the linguistic minority of the deaf. In this context in our University we try to establish the model of the human resources and structures for the coordination of the interpreting volunteer flow demanding a:

- Committee for the coordination of sign language interpreting services.
- Committee for the direction of training programs in general and special sign language.
- Legal coverage.
- Digital development of thesauri of pictorial elements and signs of general and special sign language.

The ethical dimension

There is a bad need for parallel actions for the support of natural users and speakers and the interpreters of sign language in training, in the labor market and in the profession as a

whole. We propose to the Social Policy Committee a representative list of the priorities for the future, in relation to the frame of activism in the sign language interpreting for academic purposes.

- Training for the use of special [training of volunteers in the special language of each department] and general [inter – disciplinary course of general sign language offered] sign language.
- Training for the recognized types of sign language (transliteration/ interpretation according to meaning/ successive/ simultaneous)
- Training for the international sign language.

- Postgraduate degree in training interpreters for general and special sign language, which depends on the language and translation departments of Greek universities.
- Lending library of parallel texts and thesauri (texts which can be models for the conduct of an act of interpreting).
- Last but not least a) to put pressure on the political parties and the governmental institutions to institutionalize the law for the support of the users of sign language as members of a minority language community in the Greek universities and b) to introduce the sign language interpreters to the Greek translator and interpreter organizations.

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