

## Comparing Minority Languages – a Case Study of Flemish Sign Language and Upper Sorbian<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This paper compares some sociolinguistic aspects of Flemish Sign Language (the language signed in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium) and Upper Sorbian (a West Slavonic language spoken in the east of Germany). For both languages, the following aspects are discussed: establishing the number of signers/speakers; policies which lead to a situation of unstable diglossia; the domain in which both languages are being used; disrupted transmission patterns; (absence of) written tradition; (absence of) formal standard; language rights and the grounds on which these rights are granted; and attitudes towards the languages and their speakers/signers. To end with, the future vitality of VGT and USo is discussed.

###**Keywords** are missing###

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## 1. Introduction

This paper compares some sociolinguistic aspects of minority languages, taking as an example Flemish Sign Language (*Vlaamse Gebarentaal*, VGT) and Upper Sorbian (*hornjoserbšćina*, USO). Flemish Sign Language is the language signed in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. The sign language of the southern part of Belgium (Wallonia) is the French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB, *La Langue des Signes de Belgique Francophone*). Belgium as a country is governed by the territoriality principle, which means that specific territories are allocated specific languages, and all the public services in that territory are only provided in that language. The official (constitutionally recognised) language of the Flemish region is Dutch, while the official language of the southern region is French. The region of Brussels-Capital is bilingual, and in the eastern regions of the country, German is spoken.

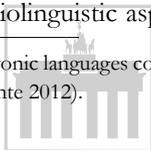
Upper Sorbian is a West Slavonic<sup>2</sup> language spoken in the East German states of Saxony and Brandenburg by the Sorbs, one of the four acknowledged autochthonous minorities of the country, the others being the Frisians, the Sinti/Roma and the Danes. The Sorbs are first mentioned in the year 631 in Fredegar's chronicle<sup>3</sup> from the early Middle Ages and are the last remnants of the Slavic-speaking population which once reached the Baltic sea in the North and (nowadays) Frankfurt/Main and Hamburg in the West.

It is important to mention our positionality as authors here, since we are all three involved in the language planning and policy processes for the respective languages. De Meulder is a deaf researcher from Flanders, born and raised within a hearing non-signing family. She has been involved in deaf political activism in many contexts, and signs VGT at home with her two children. She was and is currently also taking part in some of the language planning and policy processes for VGT mentioned in this article. Werner is an Upper Sorbian learner who has lived and worked in the Sorbian territory for over 12 years and who is speaking USO with his children. He is responsible for the education of Sorbian teachers and specialists for Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig. He holds the only full professorship to a minority language in Germany. De Weerd is a deaf researcher and teacher from Flanders and born and raised within a deaf family with VGT as the home language. He currently resides in Finland, where he has been living for 13 years. He is married to a Finnish woman and has two multilingual children. He has been involved in language activism in both Flanders and Finland.

The cross-modal nature of this comparison is rather rare. Usually, studies compare the grammatical or sociolinguistic aspects of either different sign lan-

<sup>2</sup> The Sorbian branch of the West Slavonic languages comprises Upper Sorbian and the extremely endangered Lower Sorbian (see Trunte 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Discussed in detail by Abel (1888).



guages<sup>4</sup> or of spoken minority languages.<sup>5</sup> Fewer comparisons take into consideration both spoken (minority) languages *and* sign languages.<sup>6</sup> More recent lines of research begin to explore multilingual contexts where multiple sign and/or multiple spoken languages are used.<sup>7</sup> Nonaka points to sociolinguistic power imbalances between spoken and signed languages. Sign languages are often not considered in academic discussions on language policy and planning, and language endangerment and revitalisation.<sup>8</sup> Although they are acknowledged academically as languages, and legally recognized in an increasing number of countries,<sup>9</sup> sign languages and deaf people are still often pathologised by other, mainly (para-) medical, professions and by the general public, who associate them with disability.

In this article, we compare some sociolinguistic aspects of VGT and USo, namely the problem of establishing the number of signers/speakers; policies which lead to a situation of unstable diglossia; the domain in which both languages are being used; disrupted transmission patterns of both languages; (absence of) written tradition; (absence of) formal standard; language rights and the grounds on which these rights are granted; and attitudes towards the languages and their speakers/signers. We have chosen these aspects because they are relevant factors of comparison but also because we are familiar with them from our own professional and personal experiences, and because they have a central place in our roles as language activists. For each aspect, we will first discuss VGT and then USo. While some aspects are similar for the two languages, other aspects are different, while still others are partly similar, partly different. To conclude, we will reflect on the future of VGT and USo.

## 2. Establishing the number of signers/speakers

For many (minority) languages, establishing the number of speakers and their level of competence is problematic.<sup>10</sup> This is also true for VGT and USo. This hampers advocacy efforts because while size shouldn't matter when claiming language rights, from policy makers' perspective, claims for those rights and resources need to be warranted with evidence about the size of 'need' and likely impact. Data from censuses for example guide the development and implementation of

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Zeshan 2004; Sáfár et al. 2015; Reffell & McKee 2009.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. Extra & Gorter 2001; Glaser 2007; Walsh & McLeod 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Meier, Cormier & Quinto-Pozos 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas 2010; de Bres 2015; De Meulder 2016a.

<sup>7</sup> Holmström & Schönström *forthcoming*; Kelly, Tapio & Dufva 2015 and Tapio 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Nonaka 2014.

<sup>9</sup> De Meulder 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Spolsky 2004; Vogt et al. 2012.



public policy, and the lack of statistical information about minority groups is often referred to and used by governments when such groups make demands<sup>11</sup>.

## 2.1. VGT

For sign languages, very few countries have reliable data over many decades on the number of people in their population who either are deaf and/or a signer and their level of competence. Because different definitions and indicators are used, it is difficult to compare from one point in time to another and from one country to another.<sup>12</sup> This lack of reliable data makes it difficult to discuss sign languages as minority languages, and include them in minority language policies and statistics. They also make numbers prone to being inflated or talked down, depending on the point of view. In the context of census figures in Australia, for example, Johnston (2006,149) mentions a belief by deaf communities that their size “has been consistently and substantially underreported”<sup>13</sup>, while Mitchell et al., talking about the U.S. context, mention the tendency for advocates to *overstate* when citing statistics.<sup>14</sup> In countries where censuses have been carried out and a question about sign language was included, this has led to different outcomes. The way in which this question was asked influenced the outcome and since the figures are self-reported they are not always reliable.<sup>15</sup> In Austria, there is a documented case from the 2001 Census when people could tick-box one or several languages they used, choosing from German, Hungarian, Slovenian, Burgenland-Croatian, Romanian, Croatian, Czech, Serbian, Slovakian or Turkish; there was an empty field in which people could fill in other languages. One deaf man decided to write ‘Österreichische Gebärdensprache’ (Austrian Sign Language), which was subsequently crossed out by a civil servant.<sup>16</sup> In the 2011 Census in Ireland, Irish Sign Language (ISL) was not included in the language question (Question 15, relating to the usage of languages spoken at home) but was included elsewhere: not in Migration and Diversity (Profile 6), as might have been expected, but in the Bill of Health (Profile 8). For the 2016 Census, the Irish Deaf Society urged both deaf and hearing signers to write ‘Irish Sign Language’ (and not ‘ISL’ or just ‘sign language’) in answer to Question 15, “Do you speak a language other than English at home?”<sup>17</sup> In Finland, by law, everyone has one registered mother tongue and one ‘preferred communication language’ in the Population Information System. Since

<sup>11</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas 2010. For a discussion on the use of census data see Busch 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Johnston 2006.

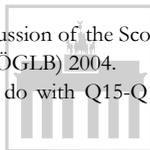
<sup>13</sup> Johnston 2006,149.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell et al. 2006.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Macpherson 2015 for a discussion of the Scottish 2011 Census

<sup>16</sup> Österreichischer Gehörlosen Bund (ÖGLB) 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Elaine from IDS explains what to do with Q15-Q17 on this year’s census’: <https://vimeo.com/162667738>



2008, it has been possible to fill in either Finnish Sign Language or Finland-Swedish Sign Language as one's mother tongue. However, in practice, registering one of the national sign languages as one's mother tongue is not yet very common and so far, approximately only 400 people have done so<sup>18</sup> (out of an estimated population of 3,000 deaf and 6,000–9,000 hearing signers).<sup>19</sup> It is not clear why this number remains so low, but it could be attributed to people not knowing how to do it or where to find the information, don't see the actual benefits of it or are afraid that doing it would cut some of the services they receive now<sup>20</sup>.

In other countries, the law forbids language censuses. This is the case in Belgium where there are no official statistics for the number of people using a certain language and a lack of reliable data with regard to the number of both deaf and hearing signers and their level of proficiency. The first (and still only) demographic study suggests there are about 4,500 deaf 'sign language users'.<sup>21</sup> They mention however that the results have to be interpreted with caution: because of the law on protection of privacy, they had to work with a survey of the target group and the group of respondents only consisted of people who voluntarily collaborated, so it does not constitute a representative sample.

Just like in other, mostly Western, countries, boundaries of the Flemish deaf community are becoming more permeable, and there is a continuing transition to 'Flemish sign language community', including hearing people who identify themselves with VGT and what it means to them (e.g. people with deaf parents, interpreters, parents of deaf children, teachers, learners, partners) and people who claim an association with the language by learning it, mostly through formal lessons. Further in line with evolutions in other, mostly Western, countries, it can be assumed that the demographic profile of the Flemish sign language community is increasingly dominated by a growing number of deaf and hearing 'new signers' who learn VGT later in life through peer contact or formal lessons.<sup>22</sup> The number of deaf new signers is increasing because of the erosion of traditional transmission settings (deaf schools and deaf clubs), while the increasing number of hearing new signers is linked to the greater visibility of sign languages and increased intercultural contacts. At the same time, there seems to be an ever-diminishing number of deaf traditional signers, who have acquired VGT via intergenerational or peer transmission at an early age (in a home or school context).

It is even likely that among the very youngest age groups in Flanders, there are more hearing than deaf signers, because there is a growing awareness among deaf parents about the importance of signing with their children (over 95% of deaf

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication Virpi Thurén, 6 March 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Suomen viittomakielten kielipoliittinen ohjelma 2010; Finnish Government 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication Virpi Thurén, 6 March 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Loots et al. 2003.

<sup>22</sup> See De Meulder & Murray *in press*.



parents have hearing children), and hearing parents are often advised against signing with their deaf children (over 95% of deaf children have hearing parents), and/or do not receive holistic information from the services that consult them.<sup>23</sup> In the older age groups, hearing new signers outnumber traditional signers (deaf and hearing) and deaf new signers. This numerical disparity is also found in some indigenous language groups like the Sámi<sup>24</sup>, Māori<sup>25</sup> and many other minorities<sup>26</sup> (O'Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo 2015), and greatly impacts the linguistic future of and language change in the Flemish sign language community.

## 2.2. USo

In Germany, language censuses are also not possible and there are no reliable data regarding the number of speakers of Upper and Lower Sorbian and their level of competence. According to the Sorbian law of Saxony<sup>27</sup> (*Sächsisches Sorbengesetz*, *Sächs.SorbG*), everybody is a Sorb who says so. This assertion cannot be legally questioned or affirmed, and does not need to be based on language command (*Sächs.SorbG*, §1). Often long out-dated numbers of speakers are being used on the grounds that they are the last reliable data available. After World War II, Černik (1955/56) estimated that there were about 50,000 speakers of Upper Sorbian (in Saxony) and 30,000 speakers of Lower Sorbian (in Brandenburg). This number has decreased dramatically. For Lower Sorbian, Norberg states there are 12,000 speakers,<sup>28</sup> Jodlbaur et al. estimate a number of 9,000 (based on the data of three villages).<sup>29</sup> Since most speakers at that time were over 70 years old, at the time of writing this article, their numbers could be down to a few hundred. Vogt et al. counted the number of school children learning Sorbian languages at school (4.056 USo, 1.824 LSo)<sup>30</sup>, calculated the general number of school children in relation to the Saxonian and Brandenburg population (14,88% and 8,17% respectively), and such estimated the number of people (children, parents, and grandparents) positively interested in the Sorbian languages (33.233 and 22.339 respectively). Taken in regard the high fertility in parts of the catholic region, and the large number of Sorbians living outside the legally assigned core regions, Vogt et al. tend to confirm the Federal Government numbering of 60.000 Sorbians at roughly 50.000 similar to the number of Danes in Germany. We think this number is far too optimistic as on the one hand, it confuses a positive *attitude* to-

<sup>23</sup> Bosteels et al. 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Sarivaara, Uusiautti, & Määttä 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Spolsky 2003.

<sup>26</sup> O'Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Similar laws and regulations exist in Brandenburg.

<sup>28</sup> Norberg 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Jodlbauer et al. 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Vogt et al. 2012.



wards anything Sorbian with a Sorbian *identity* and on the other hand, it does not distinguish between linguistic competence and identity. Vogt et al. also seem to take for granted that attending lessons at school automatically results in linguistic competence.<sup>31</sup>

The Upper Sorbian region can be divided roughly into a Protestant and a Catholic region due to certain sociolinguistic similarities<sup>32</sup>. In the Protestant region of Upper Sorbian, the situation is similar, maybe even worse than in Brandenburg. Here, the use of Sorbian is mainly confined to older and linguistically isolated individuals. The only more or less compact territory is the Catholic region, comprising the Catholic villages between Budyšin (Bautzen), Kamjeńc (Kamenz) and Wojerecy (Hoyerswerda) with about 12,000 inhabitants. However, their command of USo varies and quite a noticeable number has no knowledge of USo at all. According to Walde (2004), in 2001 there were about 6,500 Sorbian speakers in the Catholic region; he noticed that fluent command of Sorbian is least frequent in the young generation. The Sorbian School Association (Serbske šulske towarstwo) stated in the USo newspaper (30.11.15), that the number of children fluent in Sorbian has decreased by 53% since 1994, so there are only about 650 children left who are able to speak and write Sorbian.

### 3. Linguistic oppression and unstable diglossia

#### 3.1. VGT

VGT, like any sign language, has been the subject of oppressive and assimilationist policies from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 1970s. After the infamous Milan conference in 1880, which sought to establish the superiority of the oral method, the oralist ideology in education became dominant and VGT was banned from deaf schools, the primary institutions where the language had hitherto been allowed to flourish (De Clerck 2009; Van Herreweghe et al. 2015). During this period of oralism, which lasted about a century, VGT was not used or developed in official language domains (education, public administration, science, broadcasting). It was used unofficially however by deaf people in their homes and in clubs where they met during leisure time.

<sup>31</sup> Vogt et al. 2012.

<sup>32</sup> During the first half of the 17th century, almost all of the Sorbian territory became protestant (as well as the surrounding German territory). The only Catholic villages were the Upper Sorbian villages around the abbey Marijina Hvězda/Marienstern and part of Budyšin/Bautzen. So the Catholic region (located in the triangle Budyšin/Bautzen – Kamjeńc/Kamenz – Wojerecy/Hoyerswerda) was a minority with regard to their faith as well as their language. While the Protestant region is linguistically not as homogenous as the Catholic region, it makes sense to group them together under this denomination because a) the sociolinguistic situation is very similar and b) they had the same standard language (s.b.).

Only in the late 1970s did VGT become visible again, although the Flemish deaf community at that point had internalised the oralist ideology to such extent that language use was characterised by unstable diglossia with Dutch seen as the real, higher language, and VGT perceived as the lower language. Between 1979 and the late 1990s this led to Fevlado, the Flemish deaf association, defending the use of Signed Dutch, a system for ‘visualising’ spoken Dutch by means of signs (both from VGT and newly created signs). Apart from the situation of unstable diglossia, there were a few other reasons for this decision to officially promote and develop Signed Dutch (Van Herreweghe et al. 2015).<sup>33</sup> The Flemish deaf association’s leadership mainly consisted of hearing people with deaf parents or deaf people with good spoken language skills. This gave the implicit message that to be in charge, one needed to master a ‘real’ language and that those with a better knowledge of Dutch were somehow more competent or intelligent. Another reason was that it was assumed that a communication system with a ‘unified’ lexicon and a ‘good’ (Dutch) grammar would meet with less resistance from Dutch speakers.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the Fevlado leadership was of the opinion that Dutch speakers would not accept a sign language with five regional varieties and no standard. Therefore, between 1979 and the mid 1990s, Fevlado took several initiatives to promote Signed Dutch, mainly by organizing Signed Dutch courses for hearing people, taught by deaf people who had made themselves familiar with the system (but did generally not receive any instruction in/about Signed Dutch<sup>35</sup>). Although one of the aims of the development of Signed Dutch was to improve and facilitate communication between VGT signers and Dutch speakers by making a ‘bridge’ between the two languages, this never really occurred. Van Herreweghe et al. assume that this was because in order to master Signed Dutch well, one had to have a sufficient proficient knowledge of Dutch, which many deaf people did not have.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, we assume that Signed Dutch also felt unnatural for traditional deaf VGT signers. One of the other aims was to visualise spoken Dutch by means of signs in educational contexts, to teach deaf children Dutch, but this aim as well was never really achieved and even led to risks concerning VGT’s development.<sup>37</sup>

In the 1990s, in line with a growing academic and political awareness of sign languages and an increasing number of countries legally recognising their sign languages, some changes took place. The Fevlado leadership changed, Fevlado set up ‘deaf awareness courses’ for young deaf adults, and there were an increasing number of international exchanges and contacts (De Clerck 2007). Deaf

<sup>33</sup> Van Herreweghe et al. 2015.

<sup>34</sup> See also Loncke 1983.

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication Paul De Weerd, 7 March 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Van Herreweghe et al. 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2004.



signers gradually became aware of VGT's status as a language. In 1997, Fevlado officially rejected the use of Signed Dutch. This change in linguistic attitudes and ideologies led to corpus and status planning activities for VGT in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first publications appeared on grammatical aspects of VGT;<sup>38</sup> teaching materials were being developed and a digital dictionary VGT-Dutch/Dutch-VGT was launched<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.2. USo

Throughout their history, the Sorbs have been discriminated against by the Germans. For example, they had to pay additional taxes and in order to be admitted to artisan guilds, had to prove that they were not Sorbian. Calling somebody 'Wende' (the old term for Sorb) was a severe insult, and the use of Sorbian was forbidden in several regions at several times.<sup>40</sup> Sorbs with incomplete command of German were seen as dull and uneducated. Therefore, many of the younger Sorbian people who left their home villages tried to assimilate into German society as soon as possible. But also at home, educated Sorbian people decided to speak German to their children, especially if they had a German spouse who would often not tolerate Sorbian at home<sup>41</sup>.

After both World Wars, the Sorbs tried to achieve political independence, but failed: after World War I, the *Wendische Volkspartei* was unable to get enough votes for their political goal of uniting Lusatia with the newly founded First Czechoslovak Republic (Meškank 2003, Elle 2014) After World War II, the plans for an independent Lusatia were ultimately turned down. In 1937, the German Nazi government forbade all expression in Sorbian. After World War II, the Sorbs became a recognised minority – supported by the Russian-dominated Soviet Union – and both Upper and Lower Sorbian were introduced in schools both as a means of teaching and as a subject. However this was only done in the few schools defined as Sorbian schools, not in all schools of the region, which gave parents the possibility to choose between schools with or without Sorbian for their children. In later German Democratic Republic (GDR) times (1949–1990), there were six middle schools (Chóśćicy, Pančicy, Worklecy, Ralbicy, Radwor, Budyšin – all of them in the Catholic region) which offered so-called A-classes where Sorbian

<sup>38</sup> Van Herreweghe 1995; Vermeerbergen 1996; 1997.

<sup>39</sup> <http://gebaren.ugent.be>

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed account see Brankač/Měšk 1975 and especially Stone 2015; cf. also Vogt et al. 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Traces of this are especially salient in Lower Lusatia where many old German speakers who do not know Sorbian are speaking German with a strong Sorbian accent (and with errors). This is due to the fact that their Sorbian-speaking parents used German with them – in spite of their insufficient command of the language – in order to secure them a better (that is: German) future. See Keller (2000) for more on the use of Sorbian in mixed-language families.

was a means of instruction in some subjects as well as a subject. Furthermore, there was the Sorbian EOS (Erweiterte Oberschule, similar to grammar school) in Budyšin/Bautzen.

Since command of Sorbian or learning it was by no means compulsory, Sorbian became increasingly marginalised and many speakers still avoid speaking Sorbian in public. The reduced domains of language use (see below) often lead to an unstable diglossia where German is used for official contexts and in case of doubt while a dialect-near colloquial register of Sorbian is used among family and Sorbian friends. Younger speakers usually have no complete command of either the dialect or the written language, but something in-between which Scholze called 'Upper Sorbian colloquial'.<sup>42</sup> This diglossia is unstable because its domains of use are very small, usage depends to a high degree on the individual group members, their command of Sorbian or lack thereof and easily results in the group's switching to German completely.

#### 4. Limited domains of language use

As a result of this oppression, and current ideologies targeting the languages, the domains in which the languages are currently used are limited.

##### 4.1. VGT

Regarding VGT, in the past few decades there have been significant advances with respect to its status and use, and ideologies towards VGT have gone through substantial developments which have been described as going "from erasure to recognition" (but also possibly back again), both within the Flemish deaf community and broader society.<sup>43</sup> Currently, the societal domains where VGT is being used have expanded although they are still very limited.

With an increasing number of deaf students pursuing bachelor or master degrees, VGT is now being used in higher education although not as a language of instruction; in most cases it concerns lectures in Dutch or English which are interpreted into VGT for deaf students. VGT is also used in broadcasting, but again Dutch is the source language, which is interpreted into VGT: the daily 7 o'clock news on the public broadcaster is interpreted and viewable on the Internet and television, as is the daily children magazine. The fact that the 7 o'clock evening news is interpreted and not broadcasted as a deaf-created programme, and that this is done by hearing interpreters (mostly foreign language learners),

<sup>42</sup> Scholze 2008, Šolčić 2005. Both are the same person – Šolčić is the Sorbian form, Scholze the German form. As a rule, in German or English publications the German name is being used, while in Sorbian publications the Sorbian form is preferred. The same is true for the second author's name which is Edward Wornar in Sorbian and Eduard Werner in German.

<sup>43</sup> Van Herreweghe et al. 2015.

brings with it a host of issues concerning ownership and development of the language.<sup>44</sup> VGT has been used on a daily basis in the Flemish Parliament for over 10 years by deaf MP Helga Stevens and the interpreters who work for her, and with Stevens' election as MEP, is now being used at the European Parliament, although it is not an official working language. VGT is also increasingly being used on social media: the VGT community has its own Facebook group (named “*Vlaamse Gebarentaal*”; *Flemish Sign Language*) where the use of VGT is vigorously discussed (in VGT). Social media also allow to disseminate information, videos, and other media in VGT. Literature in VGT is being developed, mostly aimed at children, for example children's poetry and digital children books (although this remains to be very limited compared to literature in Dutch).

For British Sign Language (BSL), Woll & Adam (2012) have estimated that for every deaf person who uses BSL there are nine hearing people who have some knowledge of the language.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned previously, this is the case in Flanders as well. Notwithstanding this fact, VGT is not yet really widely known or used in Flanders as compared to for example the USA, where approximately 100,000 people learn American Sign Language (ASL) at postsecondary institutions annually,<sup>46</sup> making it the third most commonly taught language at that level. VGT is not offered as a foreign language in Flemish secondary or higher education.

While VGT might be, in specific situations, the first or preferred language of deaf signers in Flanders, this does not mean they only know or use VGT. The stereotypical image of a monolingual deaf person who can only express themselves in sign language does not reflect reality. Due to sophisticated hearing technologies, increased access to the national curriculum and increasing transnational connections among deaf signers (Friedner & Kusters 2015), the younger generation of deaf VGT signers often have multilingual competency in several signed and spoken languages (in their written and sometimes spoken modality).

Until recently there has been little recognition of deaf people's multilingual and multimodal practices, although current research is increasingly focusing on these, as well as on the theme of access to resources that enable such practices.<sup>47</sup> In public policy however, the multilingual and multimodal language practices of deaf signers are often not yet recognised, and legislation for sign languages is often justified by referring to various dependency or deficit arguments.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> De Meulder & Heyerick 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Woll & Adam 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Goldberg et al. 2015.

<sup>47</sup> See Kusters et al. [forthcoming](#) for a discussion and overview.

<sup>48</sup> De Meulder 2016a, b.



## 4.2. USo

For many centuries, the use of Upper Sorbian was confined to the villages and perceived by the speakers as the language of the peasants. Written forms of Sorbian were basically confined to religious contexts. This changed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Sorbs started to feel part of the Slavic family; as a result, a written language was created by the Sorbian scientific community (which consisted mainly of priests and teachers) and their organisation, the *Maćica Serbska*, which aimed at reducing German influence and forms the base of the literary language of today. But this slavificised Sorbian also created a gap between ordinary people and the intelligence<sup>49</sup>.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of written Sorbian was mainly confined to the Bible and similar writings, while all official documents had to be in German. Only in very rare cases (like the Court files from Huska/Gaußig) Sorbian was used to record court cases (obviously when the people involved did not know German). As a rule of thumb, to progress one needed to learn German and it was certainly helpful to hide one's Sorbian provenience.

The establishment of the LPGs<sup>50</sup> during GDR times destroyed the old village structures and removed a building block of the traditional Sorbian society. Bit by bit, Sorbian lost its territory and increasingly became a network language<sup>51</sup> spoken by individual families. At the time of writing, there are no completely Sorbian villages and only a few where Sorbian speakers are in the majority. Since Sorbian speakers are completely bilingual (and more often than not their German is better than their Sorbian), the language tends to get lost in mixed communities and relationships. Today, the language is still being actively used by most Sorbian families in the Catholic villages; Scholze describes their language as Upper Sorbian Vernacular<sup>52</sup>, but it seems to be rather the continuation of the Catholic dialect influenced by the literary language taught at school. A more literary form of Upper Sorbian is used by Upper Sorbian institutions and schools.

Additionally, there is often quite a lot of intolerance being displayed towards USo based on the argumentation that Sorbian speakers, since they are capable of speaking German, have to do so and doing otherwise in the presence of people who do not speak Sorbian is merely rude<sup>53</sup>. This viewpoint is being accepted by

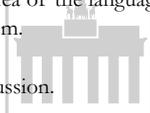
<sup>49</sup> Even more so in Lower Sorbian, which is outside the scope of this article.

<sup>50</sup> *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft* (Agricultural Production Cooperative) were large collectivised farms after the model of the Soviet kolchoz.

<sup>51</sup> Network language means that the area of the language has become a network of small groups with little or no contact between them.

<sup>52</sup> Scholze 2006.

<sup>53</sup> See Walde (2010) for a detailed discussion.



quite a number of Sorbian speakers and it restricts the usage of USo even further. For a detailed review of identity issues, see Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak (2014).<sup>54</sup>

## 5. Written tradition

The presence or absence of a written tradition is a factor in which VGT and USo are different. VGT, like any sign language, lacks a written tradition (although there are several sign orthographies), while Sorbian has a widespread standard written form.

### 5.1. VGT

Sign languages can be characterized as unwritten languages, since there are no deaf communities that have a written tradition.<sup>55</sup> While sign orthographies have been designed for creating sign language texts, with SignWriting as probably the best-known example, these have primarily been used in educational settings and are hardly used by adult deaf signers. In Flanders, for example, SignWriting is used in one deaf school and in the online dictionary VGT-Dutch/Dutch-VGT. While Flemish deaf signers do not use sign orthographies in their daily lives, researchers wanting to notate sign language only rarely make use of them either, probably because the limited role these orthographies play in the language communities themselves.<sup>56</sup> For research aims, notation systems such as Stokoe notation, HamNoSys and ‘glossing’ have been developed.<sup>57</sup> This absence of a written tradition makes the role of the surrounding majority language prominent in deaf signers’ lives. When VGT signers want to communicate with each other or with non-signers in a written form, they do so in Dutch (or in another written language they know). Technological developments however have led to signers increasingly communicating with each other and with non-signers through video calls and by sending video messages. In situations when spoken communication with a non-signer is necessary (e.g. telephone calls, all kinds of appointments), an interpreter can be used – either live or by video relay. Flanders has such a Video Relay Service where signers can make phone calls in VGT, but currently the availability of this service is limited and does not meet international telecommunication standards.

Bickford et al. make a distinction between the use of writing and widespread dissemination of ‘literature’, referring to “mass distribution of instances of

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<sup>54</sup> Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Crasborn 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Crasborn 2015.

<sup>57</sup> For a broader discussion of transcription and notation methods for sign languages, we refer to Crasborn 2015.



the language in relatively fixed forms”.<sup>58</sup> In sign languages, these may include published dictionaries and instruction materials (either in video or in print), dissemination of stories (e.g. on DVD) and mass media, both traditional broadcast media and Internet such as YouTube and vlogs. All these literature forms are available for VGT, although up till now only very limited. Bickford et al. state that while the use of a language in writing is indeed an expansion of function and thus contributes to its vitality, sign languages show that support from educational institutions, dissemination of literature and standardisation are equally important for an increased vitality.<sup>59</sup>

## 5.2. USo

Until the medieval, there are next to no written documents in Sorbian. There is an old sentence which is supposedly Old Sorbian cited by Thietmar von Merseburg (975–1018) in his chronicles; there are also several interlinear glosses<sup>60</sup>, e.g. the Emmeram glosses and the lost Magdeburg glosses. The *Kayna Petschaft*, which was assumed to be Sorbian by Pfuhl<sup>61</sup>, is really Old Polabian<sup>62</sup>. The hitherto oldest Upper Sorbian manuscript, the Sorbian Oath (Burger Eydt Wendisch), has been shown to be Czech with only slight Upper Sorbian influence,<sup>63</sup> which leaves Gregorius, a manuscript with hymns from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century as the oldest longer Upper Sorbian document.<sup>64</sup>

As a consequence of the 30-years war 1618–1648, the rivalry between the Catholic and Protestant churches led to their establishing two Upper Sorbian literary languages, a Catholic and a Protestant one. On the Catholic side, Jurij Hawštyń Swětlik translated the Bible from 1688–1707 and compiled the first printed (Latin – Upper Sorbian) dictionary. Jakub Xaver Ticin wrote the first printed Upper Sorbian grammar (1679). On the Protestant side, after the first works of Michal Frencl and his son, resulting in the first printed New Testament (1706), a committee translated the Bible, and Matthaeci wrote a grammar (1721), which constituted the de-facto standardisation for the next 100 years<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Bickford et al. 2015, 518.

<sup>59</sup> Bickford et al. 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Interlinear notes in old Latin or German manuscripts.

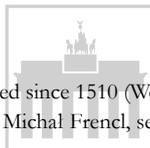
<sup>61</sup> Pfuhl 1888.

<sup>62</sup> Wornar 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Wornar 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Wölke 2007. Lower Sorbian is attested since 1510 (Wornar 2011).

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed account, especially of Michal Frencl, see Kaulfürst (2012).



## 6. Standardisation

Standardisation is another factor in which VGT and Uso are different. VGT has no formal standard but a natural standardisation process is taking place, while Sorbian has a standardised written form, although one which can hardly be enforced and of which several aspects are problematic.<sup>66</sup>

### 6.1. VGT

VGT consists of five regional varieties that have developed in and around the different Flemish deaf schools: West Flanders, East Flanders, Antwerp, Flemish Brabant and Limburg<sup>67</sup> although due to increasingly supra-regional contacts, a natural standardisation process is taking place.<sup>68</sup>

In 1997, the Flemish deaf association Fevlado held a debate about the standardisation of VGT. There were concerns that VGT would not be widely used in education and not be legally recognised by the government if it didn't have a standard variant. These concerns did not come from thin air: in the Netherlands, a neighbouring country, the Dutch government set an imposed standardisation of part of the lexicon of NGT (*Nederlandse Gebarentaal*, the language signed in the Netherlands) as a prerequisite for legal recognition of the language and its use in education.<sup>69</sup> Fevlado however decided to reject an imposed standardisation, and to find ways to support a spontaneous standardisation process. There were different reasons for this decision, the first one being that an attempt at lexical 'unification' through the use of 'Signed Dutch' in the 1970s (cf. above) had not yielded the expected outcomes and had even been a threat for the development of VGT.<sup>70</sup> Other reasons were that it was impossible to decide upon a suitable methodology for standardisation and that there was a general lack of in-depth lexicological research into VGT.<sup>71</sup> Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen (2009) mention different practical issues that resulted from this decision, for example the existing variation needed and still needs to be taken into account when creating learning materials, when collecting data for a VGT dictionary, and when developing grammatical reference books.<sup>72</sup> For example for the first online dictionary Dutch-VGT/VGT-Dutch it was decided to take the five regional variants as the starting point. For each sign in the dictionary is mentioned in which region the sign is used, and/or whether it is used all over Flanders.

<sup>66</sup> Werner 2015.

<sup>67</sup> De Weerdt et al. 2003; Vanhecke & De Weerdt 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Schermer 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2009.



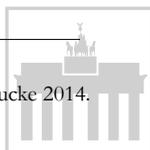
In 2015, VGT is still characterised by *intra*-regional variation (for example gender- and age-related) but the *inter*-regional variation seems to have decreased from five variants to only two, three or maximum four (Vandemeulebroucke 2012),<sup>73</sup> and there is an increasingly common lexicon because of increased contact between different Flemish regions. The inter-regional variants are said to be mostly understandable to all now (often with accommodation), except for the variants signed in Limburg (influenced by NGT and Dutch), Flemish Brabant (influenced by French) and for people who have few supra-regional contacts (Van Herreweghe & Vandemeulebroucke 2014).<sup>74</sup>

Vandemeulebroucke has investigated whether VGT signers feel the need for a standard VGT. She found that they were not entirely negative towards the idea but thought of it differently than most hearing, Dutch speakers.<sup>75</sup> VGT signers did not consider a standard VGT to be a more formal language to which they ascribed a higher status. They mostly defined it as a language of which the lexicon and grammar show a low degree of diversity and with few or no hiatuses. Additionally, they defined a standard VGT as codified, seen as neutral by the language community and as perfectly understood by signers on a national level. This last aspect however was not a reason for them to develop a standard VGT because they felt they very well understand signers from other regions (apart from the exceptions mentioned above). The prime reason for them to develop a standard VGT was because such a standard – also because of its codification – could lead to an explicit norm of the language, which could possibly safeguard it from corruption and impoverishment. VGT signers seemed to be especially concerned about how a standard VGT would be developed and about its implications. According to them, a standard VGT should never oppress or replace their regional variant; it should be a second variant to be used alongside their own vernacular. There was less consensus about the ways in which to develop a standard but an imposed process was not entirely rejected, although it would need to happen in a very transparent way in consultation with the entire signing community. Some informants were concerned about the slow pace of developing a standard, which means the signing community cannot anticipate evolutions such as VGT on national television. There were also concerns about letting this development taking its course, without any control or monitoring mechanism, because this would not benefit the language either.

<sup>73</sup> Vandemeulebroucke 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vandemeulebroucke 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Vandemeulebroucke 2012.



## 6.2. USo

Upper Sorbian was first standardised at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century for the translation of the Bible and other religious scripts. The two standards that emerged (Catholic and Protestant) remained in use until 1937. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century purism became strong; many old borrowings from German were replaced with new Slavic word formations,<sup>76</sup> and the *Maćica Serbska* (the Sorbian Scientific Association, founded in 1847) created a new written language with an orthography and grammar based on other Slavic languages (a Slavicised standard). After World War II, this standard became – with slight changes – the only Upper Sorbian standard language.

During the German Democratic Republic period, Sorbian was officially introduced in primary and secondary schools and taught both as a first and second language. Teachers were educated<sup>77</sup> and Sorbian became (at least theoretically) an official language. At that point, the standard created by the *Maćica Serbska* became official. Since school terminology was needed, spelling, lexicon and at least part of the grammar had to be standardised. Pronunciation however was not standardised. Therefore the standardised spelling of Sorbian words can be found in dictionaries but no such works with regard to pronunciation exist. This leads to linguistic insecurity and hypercorrect pronunciation.<sup>78</sup> The insecurity permeates all layers of the language, from the usage of alternate forms down to the lexicon. When in doubt, speakers will restrict their vocabulary to what can be found in dictionaries, but the main dictionary<sup>79</sup> does not contain more than 55.000 headwords and many of them are names of places and its inhabitants. Speakers also restrict the forms they use to what is found in school grammars, thereby reducing the language of native speakers to a standard originally intended to be the stepping stone for learners on their way to full competence<sup>80</sup>. Due to the restricted timeframe for learning Sorbian as a second language at school, textbooks and grammars mostly refrain from explaining irregularities when a regular form can be employed. Since speakers do not have access to any additional source of information since they are largely unavailable, their linguistic insecurity leads to avoiding irregular forms (especially, but not only when talking to non-native speakers) since the speaker wrongly suspects they might be incorrect.

Despite its standardisation and official regulations for both Saxony and Brandenburg, Sorbian is only sparingly used in official signs. Using Sorbian in

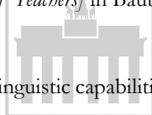
<sup>76</sup> Vandemeulebroucke 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Partly in the Leipzig university, but mainly in the *Sorbisches Institut für Lehrerbildung* [*Serbski učerški wustaw*, *Sorbian Institute for Education of Teachers*] in Bautzen/Budyšin.

<sup>78</sup> Werner 2015.

<sup>79</sup> *The Pranopisny słownik*.

<sup>80</sup> For a comprehensive review of the linguistic capabilities of Sorbian pupils, see Meškank (2009).



official communication (apart from Sorbian institutions) is hardly possible since state officers are not required to know the language, and using a Sorbian address (probably with Sorbian forms of names) instead of a German one can easily result in a letter being lost or directed to Poland or Slovakia.

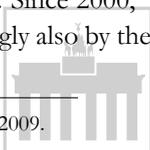
The current standardised written form of USo can hardly be enforced since a speaker of USo also has German at their disposal. Most speakers of USo are speakers of a vernacular close to the Catholic dialect and are rather unsure about the standard. According to Sorbian students, at school only very little attention is dedicated to both grammar and orthography, which is a problem when they start studying at Leipzig since for future teachers linguistic correctness is imperative. This insecurity and lack of linguistic competence even leads to Sorbian speakers using their native language only in socially 'safe' contexts, e.g. among friends and family. Furthermore, since the usage of USo is often marked as somewhat non-formal, even confident speakers of USo sometimes resort to German for an air of authority when addressing other speakers of USo, especially in written form which adds to the feeling of speaking an inferior language.

## 7. Language rights

### 7.1. VGT

The division of Belgium into two states has influenced and continues to influence the sign language used by Flemish signers. Since the split in the 1970s of the national deaf federation into a Flemish and a Walloon one, contact between Flemish and Walloon signers has decreased, causing their respective sign languages to develop separately and deviate from each other (Van Herreweghe 2002). Until roughly 20 years ago, the term 'Belgian Sign Language' was used because linguistic researchers believed there were more resemblances between VGT and LSFb (the sign language in Wallonia) than between VGT and NGT (the sign language in the Netherlands). However, due to lack of sufficient linguistic evidence that it effectively concerned two different languages a few years later the compromise 'Flemish Belgian Sign Language' was chosen to refer to the variant used in Flanders. This name was mainly used by sign linguists, most of whom were hearing at that time, whereas deaf signers themselves did not have a name for their language but usually just said 'signing' (*gebaren*) or even 'pointing' (*mijzen*).<sup>81</sup> In a political climate that led to increasingly tense relations between the Flemish and French linguistic communities, Fevlado became dissatisfied with the term 'Flemish Belgian Sign Language'. Since 2000, 'Flemish Sign Language' has been used by researchers and increasingly also by the signing community itself, to refer to the sign language in Flanders.

<sup>81</sup> Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2009.



Through the Belgian federalization process, language policy became the responsibility of the Flemish, French and German-speaking communities which can, in their own linguistic region, arrange language use through legislation called “decrees” (“*decreten*”).<sup>82</sup> In 2003, LSFb was recognized by the Parliament of the Francophone Community in Belgium (Huvelle & Haesenne 2006). In 2004, a group of young, mostly deaf people founded the DAF (Deaf Action Front) with the recognition of VGT as its main aim. They decided to use the Flemish ‘right to petition’ and nearly immediately started collecting signatures. Four months later, in January 2005, this petition was submitted to the Flemish Parliament as the most successful petition ever submitted (71,330 signatures). This was followed by a hearing in the Flemish Parliament where representatives of the Flemish deaf association, DAF, the Walloon deaf association and linguists informed the MPs what a recognition of VGT would entail. At the same time Helga Stevens, then the only deaf member of the Flemish Parliament took the initiative to draft a decree proposal. Less than a year later a proposal for a decree was submitted and on April 26, 2006, adopted by the Flemish Parliament.

This decree on the recognition of Flemish Sign Language legally recognised VGT as a language. However, VGT is not a constitutionally recognised official language in Belgium (like Dutch, French and German) nor does it have minority language status as granted by for example the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (which Belgium has not ratified and is unlikely to do so).

Article 2 of the decree states:

Flemish Sign Language, abbreviated as VGT, is the visual-gestural natural language which is used by deaf and hearing Flemish signers in the Flemish Community and in the bilingual region of Brussels-Capital. Flemish signers belong to the linguistic-cultural minority group for whom Flemish Sign Language plays an identifying role. Flemish Sign Language is herewith recognized. (translation M. De Meulder)<sup>83</sup>

The phrase “linguistic-cultural minority group” however has no legal meaning in Flanders, and does not come with certain designated linguistic or other rights.

The decree for the recognition of VGT was inspired mainly by the decree for the recognition of LSFb. However, while the latter only entails a symbolic recognition and the establishment of an Advisory Board, the VGT decree contains four different measures: (1) a symbolic recognition, (2) the establishment of a Flemish Sign Language Advisory Board, (3) yearly funding for projects “that contribute to a societal anchorage of VGT, amongst other things by the organisation, co-

<sup>82</sup> In Flanders, a decree has the same legal force as a law.

<sup>83</sup> Original in Dutch: “De Vlaamse Gebarentaal, afgekort VGT, is de visueel-gestuele natuurlijke taal die gebruikt wordt door Dove en horende Vlaamse Gebarentaligen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en in het tweetalige gebied Brussel-Hoofdstad. Vlaamse Gebarentaligen behoren tot de linguïstisch-culturele minderheidsgroep waarvoor de Vlaamse Gebarentaal een identificerende rol speelt. De Vlaamse Gebarentaal wordt hierbij erkend.

organisation or support of sensitizing activities, and (4) the recognition and funding of one centre of expertise with respect to VGT (translation M. De Meulder)

While the recognition of VGT seems to have empowered deaf people (Van Herreweghe et al. 2015),<sup>84</sup> it is important to be realistic about what it achieves. The decree only entails the recognition of VGT as a language, not of its use nor is it a recognition of signers' rights. It also falls short of creating any educational linguistic rights, which is true for most sign language recognition legislation.<sup>85</sup> Since VGT is not a constitutionally recognised official language in Belgium nor are there any other recognised minority languages, the legal status and scope of the current recognition of VGT remains unclear. The Flemish Sign Language Advisory Board has advised the competent minister that this needs to be investigated. The minister agreed with this advice and granted funding to the University of Leuven, which has investigated the issue.<sup>86</sup>

## 7.2. USo

The claim to linguistic rights is for USo associated with a sense of entitlement within a specific territory. Lower and Upper Sorbian are currently protected under Part II of the European Charta for Regional or Minority Languages as well as the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe. Furthermore, there is national and local legislation, regulations and agreements, some of them are listed in the following table<sup>87</sup>:

	Saxony	Brandenburg
<b>Laws concerning kindergartens</b>	1991; 2004: Schulgesetz §§ 2, 4a, 41, 63: mother tongue, second and foreign language	1996; 2001: §§ 4, Abs. 5; 5; 109, Abs. 1; 137, Abs. 1; 139, Abs. 1: second and foreign language
<b>Regulation</b>	1992: On working in Sorbian and other schools in the bilingual territory	2000: On educational issues of the Sorbs (Wends)
<b>Agreement</b>	1993; 2001: Agreement of the conference of the ministries of education on mutual acknowledgement of college degrees with regard to specific subjects	1994; 2001: Agreement of the conference of the ministries of education on mutual acknowledgement of college degrees with regard to specific subjects
<b>Curricula</b>	1992; 2004: Sorbian as a subject throughout the curricula	1996; 2009: Sorbian (Wendish) as a subject throughout the curricula

<sup>84</sup> Van Herreweghe et al. 2015.

<sup>85</sup> De Meulder & Murray in press.

<sup>86</sup> Le Maire 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Thanks to my colleague Jana Šolcína for providing this material.



The existing rights are partly group rights (e.g. the right to preserve the language), and partly individual rights. Regarding the enforcement of rights, individual rights are easier to deal with, since the possible plaintiff is the individual who has to prove that his or her rights are being infringed. Even this might not be a trivial case because it might still not be clear who is the defendant who has infringed the individual's rights. When dealing with group rights, there is the additional problem of who can be the plaintiff for a group which consists of people who merely assert that they belong to the group at issue.

## 8. Language rights in the public domain

### 8.1. VGT

In other societal domains that are central to the daily lives of deaf signers, the right to use VGT is limited. In healthcare, social care and judicial domains, in the great majority of cases there is no direct communication possible in VGT with front-line staff. To be able to communicate in those situations, deaf signers need to use an interpreter VGT-Dutch/Dutch-VGT.<sup>88</sup> The onus for making these situations accessible rests in most cases on signers themselves, and the Flemish government grants them only a limited amount of 'interpreting hours' on a yearly basis.<sup>89</sup> Thus, although the Flemish government recognises that VGT is a language in Flanders, signers' right to use VGT is not legally secured. What is legally secured is the right to have access to for example education, healthcare, social care and judicial domains *through* sign language, i. e. through the use of an interpreter. While the use of interpreters can bridge language gaps and facilitate communication, it does not really promote the use of the language and merely relies on a norm-and-accommodation approach neglecting to recognize the mother tongue and distinct cultural and linguistic identity of signers.<sup>90</sup> Also, the provision of interpreters, even if mandated by law, does not satisfy the requirements for institutional support for a sign language, necessary for its continuing vitality.<sup>91</sup> This interpretation of language rights as the right to access services through a sign language interpreter, is distinct about the interpretation of linguistic rights for signers.<sup>92</sup> Deaf signers thus find themselves in an almost permanent state of

<sup>88</sup> for a discussion of the use of sign language interpreters in health care settings in Flanders, see Van Herreweghe 2015.

<sup>89</sup> For their private situation, VGT signers can claim an interpreter for 18 hours a year (36 hours if motivated). Until 2014, they had to pay for transportation costs of interpreters themselves. For their professional situation, they can claim an interpreter for 10 per cent of working hours (20 per cent if motivated).

<sup>90</sup> Kymlicka & Patten 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Bickford et al. 2015.

<sup>92</sup> See also De Meulder 2016b.



being translated, and experience others' perceptions of who they are through sign language interpretation on an everyday basis, something which the majority of people never experience. A team of researchers at the Universities of Edinburgh and Manchester is currently exploring whether this state of translation is constitutive of deaf cultures in their formation, projection and transformation, and the impact of this translated self on personal identity, achievement and well-being of deaf signers.<sup>93</sup>

## 8.2. USo

According to the Sorbian Law of Saxony, every Sorb has the right to use his language in official communication with state organs in the Sorbian territory<sup>94</sup>. It is explicitly stated that there will be no additional costs or other disadvantages arising from doing so<sup>95</sup>. In practice however, there are a lot of unresolved issues. For example, in many offices there is no Sorbian-speaking frontline staff. This means that dealing with requests is often delayed which might result in other disadvantages when urgent deadlines need to be met. As already pointed out, using a Sorbian address (villages, cities and streets have different names in Sorbian and German) might easily result in a letter not reaching its destination, in spite of the fact that there is a legal base for enforcing and using them<sup>96</sup>. So from a practical point of view, if the communication is of any importance, Sorbs will at least put the German address next to the Sorbian address, or refrain from using the Sorbian address altogether. Street signs are usually bilingual (and the visual presence of Sorbian is an important difference to VGT, but others (like traffic signs) are usually only in German. However, since these deficiencies do not infringe the rights of an individual, it is not clear who can file a complaint.

## 9. Language rights in education

### 9.1. VGT

Apart from one school, VGT is not used as a language of instruction in Flemish deaf schools and very few deaf signers are employed as teachers.<sup>97</sup> Neither is it used as a language of instruction in regular education, which means that deaf pupils and students who go to a regular school need to use an interpreter too. Since 2013, the Flemish Government funds interpreters in education from kindergar-

<sup>93</sup> University of Manchester 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Which parts of Saxony belong to the Sorbian territory depends on the local communities which are all predominantly German.

<sup>95</sup> SächsSorbg: § 9 (1).

<sup>96</sup> <https://bravors.brandenburg.de/de/verwaltungsvorschriften-221120>, Sächsisches Sorbengesetz § 10

<sup>97</sup> Kusters forthcoming 2017.



ten to higher and adult education for 100% of the teaching time, although this had to be achieved by bringing the Flemish Government to court.<sup>98</sup> This means that in Flanders, children as young as age 2,5 can use an interpreter in the classroom, an issue that is not uncontested.<sup>99</sup> Also, because of the lack of people who effectively work as VGT interpreters, and because of the limited funding, this right to interpreters 100% of the teaching time often remains merely theoretical.

## 9.2. USo

Sorbian is supported financially by both the German central government and the states of Saxony and Brandenburg. There are still schools in which Sorbian is being taught as a first and second language (although less than in GDR times) and language revitalisation becomes increasingly central to the language planning.<sup>100</sup>

In the Sorbian territory, children must receive an education in Sorbian if the parents so desire<sup>101</sup>. This means that schools in the Sorbian territory have to provide Sorbian language lessons and that Sorbian and German languages are on an equal footing. In Sorbian schools, Sorbian is not only a subject but it is also a language of instruction<sup>102</sup>. However, in practice there is no real legal footing or equal right since every Sorb has to learn German but not the other way round. But at least it is stated that knowledge about the Sorbs has to be taught in every school (not only the Sorbian ones). One problem is the lack of Sorbian-speaking teachers. Many schools hire teachers who have no knowledge of Sorbian; and when it was not a job requirement at the time of hiring, there is no possibility to force them to learn it afterwards (even neglecting the fact that Sorbians would usually willingly talk German to them anyway).

Since education starts in nursery schools, those schools have to provide Sorbian education as well, which means that they need to recruit Sorbian-speaking staff<sup>103</sup>. In practice, there are several hard to overcome barriers. Firstly, just like in the schools, there might not be enough Sorbian-speaking personnel available. Secondly, neither *fluency at native speaker level* nor *basic command* is defined properly<sup>104</sup>. And finally, it is not clear what the employer is supposed to do when they

<sup>98</sup> De Meulder 2016.

<sup>99</sup> De Meulder 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Šatava (2009) for an in-depth discussion.

<sup>101</sup> Sächsisches Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt Nr. 10/2004, p. 298.

<sup>102</sup> Sächsisches Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt Nr. 10/2004, p. 298.

<sup>103</sup> Sächsisches Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt Nr. 16/2001 from 5th of December 2001, p. 705 ff. and Nr. 10/2005 from 16th of December 2005, p. 309 ff.

<sup>104</sup> This will hopefully change in the near future, when Sorbian exams according to the guidelines of the European Union become available. At the time of writing this article, the guidelines for A1 and A2 have been published on <http://www.sprachzertifikat-sorbisch.de>

have *to try to ensure* that Sorbian-speaking specialists are used for the education of Sorbian children.

## 10. Territoriality and associated rights

### 10.1. VGT

Sign languages are often regarded as non-territorial languages (as set out in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) because they are typically used throughout a country, as opposed to spoken minority languages such as Sorbian which are usually identified with a particular area of the territory of a state. Exceptions to this are so-called village sign languages<sup>105</sup> which have emerged in communities with an unusually high prevalence of deafness, and small territorial sign languages like Finland-Swedish Sign Language in Finland<sup>106</sup> or Catalan Sign Language in Spain<sup>107</sup>.

Sign languages meet the definitional criteria for inclusion in the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), depending on the account as non-territorial<sup>108</sup> or territorial languages<sup>109</sup>. However up till now, no state has ratified the Charter for any sign languages. Grin (2003) mentions that the ECRML drafting did not envisage it being applied to sign languages.<sup>110</sup> However, by now it has been extensively argued that this is due to misunderstandings, wrong information and false argumentation about the nature of sign languages on part of the Member States and the Council of Europe when the ECRML was drafted and ratified.<sup>111</sup> Batterbury argues it is (also) due to the formulation (and rigid interpretation) of article 2.1. of the ECRML, which notes that signatories have agreed to apply the ECRML to „all the regional or minority languages *spoken* within its territory (CoE 1992, article 2.1.; italics added) which excludes sign languages.<sup>112</sup> Remarkably, Grin also states that “it is clear that should a contracting state exclude a language on spurious grounds, such as ‘that is not really a language’, it would be in violation of the Charter. The self-perception of the community that uses a particular form of expression would certainly have to be taken into account”<sup>113</sup>.

<sup>105</sup> Nyst 2012; Kusters 2015; Zeshan & de Vos 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Hoyer 2004.

<sup>107</sup> Quer 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Batterbury 2012, Timmermans 2005.

<sup>109</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas 2010.

<sup>110</sup> Grin 2003.

<sup>111</sup> Krausneker 2003.

<sup>112</sup> Batterbury 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Grin 2003, 60–61.



## 10.2. USo

The Sorbs' claim to linguistic rights is associated with a sense of entitlement within a specific territory. They are a regional autochthonous minority and seen by the German government as a '*Volksgruppe*'. However, this assignment to a certain territory is at least partly arbitrary as communities can opt out of belonging to the Sorbian territory. It also depends on the time frame taken into account, since the territory in which Sorbian was spoken was different in the 16<sup>th</sup> century than it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays the principle of territoriality, if taken as a rigid criterion, can even cause problems because of the increasing mobility and dispersion of speakers. There are Sorbian communities in Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin, mostly because of students studying there and staying there after graduating. Supporting these communities officially has been difficult in the past since these cities do not belong to the Sorbian territory in the political sense (although at least Dresden and Leipzig did historically in the linguistic sense). Of course, this is even truer of smaller groups of speakers in other regions.

## 11. Interrupted intergenerational and horizontal transmission patterns

### 11.1. VGT

Sign languages, including VGT, are increasingly characterised by disrupted transmission patterns.<sup>114</sup> Since over 95% of deaf children are born to hearing (non-signing) parents (Mitchell & Karchmer 2004),<sup>115</sup> sign languages are usually not transmitted within the family. Moreover, hearing parents are increasingly targeted by a medical approach to deafness, which does not support parents in learning VGT and signing with their deaf child or even actively advises them against it.<sup>116</sup> Traditional horizontal transmission settings like deaf schools have eroded. In Flanders, following policy for children with disabilities initiated by the Flemish government, an increasing number of deaf children are individually mainstreamed in regular schools for non-signing children, where they have no contact with deaf peers or adults.<sup>117</sup> There are no kindergartens with staff fluent in VGT; early immersion programmes are absent and VGT is not used as a language of instruction in deaf schools (apart from one school). Only in less than 5% of cases where a deaf child has at least one signing (usually deaf) parent, can the language be transmitted at home. In Flanders however, not all deaf parents choose

<sup>114</sup> De Meulder & Murray ~~in press~~.

<sup>115</sup> Mitchell & Karchmer 2004.

<sup>116</sup> Bosteels et al. 2016; Matthijs et al. 2012; Humphries et al. 2016.

<sup>117</sup> De Meulder 2016.



to sign with their (deaf or hearing) children. Just like most hearing parents, some deaf parents are influenced by negative ideologies governing attitudes towards sign languages.

## 11.2. USo

For USo, intergenerational transmission has always been an issue, especially at the edges of the territory where mixed marriages occurred most frequently. In these households with only one Sorbian speaker among the parents only German, the more important language, is generally spoken to the children. In most cases, they receive a pidginised Sorbian that is only likely to reinforce negative prejudice towards the language. Since the 1950s this has become more common and has started to increasingly undermine transmission throughout the territory.<sup>118</sup> As there are no sources for recruiting new speakers, this leads to a declining number of speakers. Many speakers have a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the language and leave preserving it to official institutions.<sup>119</sup> It is a common practice to publish maps which show the territory where Sorbian was once spoken and where now individual speakers might still be living as a compact zone while making it look as a real compact<sup>120</sup> territory. In the Protestant region intergenerational continuity has more or less ceased to exist three generations ago, mostly because of Sorbian speakers devaluating their own language due to continued discrimination, and sometimes because of bad personal experiences when they had been laughed at after committing errors when speaking German. This attitude can still be found among the last speakers, and even some local newspapers have gained an anti-Sorbian reputation. In these regions, bilingual kindergartens are being established to provide the children with at least some command of Sorbian<sup>121</sup>, but the overall outcome is problematic: the kindergartens are not available full-time which means the contact time is not sufficient to achieve real fluency in Sorbian, and “immersion” is a misnomer.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Glaser 2007, 114.

<sup>119</sup> Lewaszkievicz 2014.

<sup>120</sup> *Compact* meaning that it makes sense to talk about a territory where the language is spoken, not merely a territory where (some) speakers live.

<sup>121</sup> The approach has been taken over from Britain, and similar situations and approaches are known from other minority languages.

<sup>122</sup> Schulz 2015.

## 12. Attitudes towards the languages and their signers/speakers

### 12.1. VGT

De Meulder & Murray (*in press*) position sign languages and deaf signers as having dual category status, being seen as both a linguistic minority and a group of people with a disability.<sup>123</sup> Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century however deaf communities have emphasised that their existential status is first and foremost that of a language and cultural group rather than a group of people with disabilities.<sup>124</sup> However, policies aimed towards them have traditionally envisaged them only as persons with disabilities and do not recognize their language and cultural minority status. This means that legislation regulating deaf signers' rights is primarily disability legislation or even language legislation blended with disability perspectives.<sup>125</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2007) is the first international legal instrument that recognizes deaf people's dual category-membership, but the inclusion of deaf people in the Convention has not been and still is not self-evident and poses limitations on 'the right to be different'<sup>126</sup>, especially where it concerns educational linguistic rights.<sup>127</sup>

Obasi states that deaf people are the only language minorities who have traditionally been provided interpreters on the grounds of 'personal assistance' and the only language groups who use interpreters who have been labelled 'disabled'.<sup>128</sup> One could argue that it is ironically this ascribed disability status that has allowed deaf people to continue to use sign language. Although there is an increasing academic and policy recognition of deaf people's cultural-linguistic minority status, the general public accepts deaf people are disabled and therefore does not question their use and need of sign language. Hearing majority language speakers might still automatically assume that deaf signers would shift to majority language monolingualism if they could, but accept this is not possible because of their disability status. This toleration of sign language for deaf people is already changing for example in cases of children with cochlear implants who are expected to conform to monolingual ideologies and use the majority spoken language.<sup>129</sup> It could also become questioned when genetic interventions make being deaf and preferring to use sign language a personal choice and (financial) respon-

<sup>123</sup> De Meulder & Murray (*in press*).

<sup>124</sup> Padden & Humphries 1988; Ladd 2003; Batterbury, Ladd & Gulliver 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Murray 2015.

<sup>126</sup> De Meulder 2014; Kusters et al. 2015.

<sup>127</sup> Murray et al. forthcoming 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Obasi 2008.

<sup>129</sup> De Meulder & Murray *in press*.



sibility.<sup>130</sup> It is therefore crucial that signers' right to sign language is granted, not as an accommodation to them because they are 'disabled' or lack proficiency in the majority language, but as a right irrespective of this status and proficiency.<sup>131</sup>

## 12.2. USo

A similar minority language bilingualism is often not accepted from USo speakers. Since they are not labelled disabled and are capable of acquiring and speaking German, they are often discriminated on the grounds that that speaking USo is unnecessary and even not polite. As an USo speaker, one can get openly accused of merely using USo to talk bad about others because they cannot understand what is being said.

## 13. Summary

We have now discussed some sociolinguistic aspects of VGT and USo. Some aspects are similar for VGT and USo, and by extension for (minority) languages in general. Both VGT and USo are confronted with the problem of establishing the number of speakers/signers and their linguistic competency, which contributes to their weak status. Both languages have been – and to a certain extent, still are – the subject of oppressive and assimilationist policies which leads to a situation of unstable diglossia. Both languages are only used in a limited number of domains, although it appears VGT signers are more confident to use their language in public compared to USo speakers who are regularly confronted with negative and degrading attitudes from German speakers. It has to be noted though that VGT is mostly used in public through interpreters, and its situation is thus actually not comparable to that of USo. Both VGT and USo are characterised by disrupted transmission patterns which has consequences for their future vitality.

Other factors demonstrate the differences between VGT and USo. VGT does not have a written tradition while USo has a written form (although one that can hardly be enforced) and therefore more easily enjoys visibility in public (e.g. street signs). VGT does not have a formal standard although there is a process of natural standardisation underway, while USo has a standard (although speakers' attitude towards it is primarily one of linguistic insecurity). Some factors are partly the same, partly different for the two languages. Both VGT signers and USo speakers have a limited claim to language rights and the grounds on which they are granted these rights, are different. Despite their dual category status, VGT signers are primarily granted rights because they are perceived by public policy as people with disabilities – the law recognising VGT does not grant any

<sup>130</sup> See also Johnston 2006.

<sup>131</sup> De Meulder 2016a; De Meulder & Murray *in press*.



linguistic or other rights. USo speakers are granted rights because they are a territorial minority group. This differing status within public policy as respectively people with disabilities and territorial minority groups leads to differing attitudes towards the languages and their users. Both VGT signers and USo speakers are bi- or multilingual, but VGT signers are generally not expected to shift languages because of their perceived biological incapability (although this might change in the future), while USo speakers can and are expected to do so. All these factors influence the vitality of VGT and USo.

## 14. The future of VGT and USo

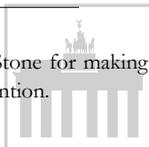
Ten years after VGT was legally recognised, it faces opposing pressures. On the one hand, the combined trend of cochlear implantation with monolingual practices in spoken language and mainstreaming policies leads to the possibility of a renewed erasure of VGT.<sup>132</sup> On the other hand, it can be argued that there has never been so much VGT present, visible, and freely accessible as any time before in history.<sup>133</sup> Modern communication technologies facilitate the recording, editing, distribution and storage of a large amount of VGT data, VGT is being broadcasted on a daily basis, an online dictionary and corpus VGT has been developed<sup>134</sup>, and VGT signers discuss their language, its etymology and use on Facebook, by posting video clips in VGT. The Flemish deaf community is further engaging in actions which can be seen as attempts to strengthen VGT's vitality. The Flemish deaf association is looking into how a bilingual sign language school for deaf and hearing children can be established in Flanders, and at how immersion programmes can be provided at pre-school age. Research is exploring how the legal recognition of VGT can be strengthened. Other actions are aimed towards the support of language transmission in the home. Deaf parents are supporting and empowering each other to use sign language at home with their children. With the support of the Flemish government the Flemish deaf association is setting up a training for "VGT coaches", deaf coaches who will come to the homes of deaf children to support VGT acquisition and use. The same project aims to build bridges between families with deaf children and the deaf community based on a cultural-linguistic understanding of being deaf.

Nevertheless, these factors do not bode well for the future. While sign languages, particularly national sign languages in Western countries are more protected and granted legal recognition than ever before, they are also more threatened than ever before, even taking into account interrupted transmission

<sup>132</sup> Van Herreweghe et al. 2015.

<sup>133</sup> I would like to thank Christopher Stone for making this point in the context of British Sign Language, and bringing it to my attention.

<sup>134</sup> corpusvgt



patterns and educational policies.<sup>135</sup> The ‘Cataloguing endangered sign languages’ project<sup>136</sup> has catalogued 15 sign languages so far, and the results suggest that endangerment *is* prevalent among sign languages, also among the national sign languages included in the project, which are all labelled ‘vulnerable’. On Bickford’s et al. adapted EGIDS<sup>137</sup>, McKee & Manning consider New Zealand Sign Language to be at level 6b, “threatened”: “used for face-to-face communication within all generations but losing users”<sup>138</sup>. There is reason to believe that level 6b can be applied to most Western, national sign languages, including VGT, especially because NZSL is a sign language with a strong legitimation (official language) and considerable institutionalization, which is not the case for most sign languages.

Since the reunion of Germany in 1990, the number of Sorbian speakers has declined for a variety of reasons. In the Protestant part of the region, the language has not been passed on to the younger generation and the old generation are dying out. Increased mobility, coupled with high unemployment after the reunion of Germany has resulted in many young people leaving the region, among them Sorbian speakers. While Lower Sorbian is on the verge of extinction as a family language or native language, USo still stands its ground in the Catholic region – the aforementioned triangle Budyšin (Bautzen) – Kamjeńc (Kamenz) – Wojerecy (Hoyerswerda) with ca. 6,500 speakers. Outside the Catholic region, the usage of Sorbian is mainly confined to old and linguistically isolated individuals. Sorbian revitalisation projects (WITAJ) only count numbers of pupils and groups, but do not investigate the level of competence of either teachers or pupils, which puts a big question mark behind these efforts. In Lower Lusatia, such a revitalisation project has been started under the supervision of the second author to investigate several aspects of teaching Lower Sorbian in primary schools. At the time of writing developing language tests according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a work in progress.

USo is a language whose speakers always have to justify<sup>139</sup> its use. This is even more so when speakers become dispersed since this means Sorbian speakers almost always find themselves in a mixed group. Unlike VGT, which is still largely associated with disability by majority society and often seen as something deaf people ‘need’ because they lack access to the spoken language, USo is widely regarded as something unnecessary, and the manifestation of a speaker’s stubborn-

<sup>135</sup> De Meulder & Murray *in press*

<sup>136</sup> International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies (iSLanDS)

<sup>137</sup> On Bickford’s et al. 2015.

<sup>138</sup> McKee & Manning 2015.

<sup>139</sup> cf. Walde, Martin 2009.



ness, impoliteness or even nationalism.<sup>140</sup> This means enforceable linguistic rights are not easily granted. The fact that the German lexicon of every native Sorbian speaker is larger than their Sorbian lexicon (with large parts missing altogether) leads to feelings of inferiority that encourage them to give up the language relatively easily. Keeping up with new media is hardly possible because localisation of computer programs and smartphones etc. is market-driven and therefore unlikely to happen for small languages. On the positive side, other new media like social media favour small spoken languages since their speakers can readily use them. There are many Facebook groups dedicated to small languages, some of them are in USo.

Still, the number of speakers is declining since the language is no longer socially anchored. Unless new contexts arise for using USo, there is little hope for the language to survive.

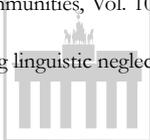
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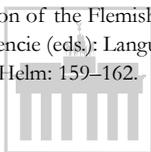
<sup>140</sup> For an in-depth account of the attitude of German pupils towards their Sorbian peers and their language, see Ratajczak (2011). On the identity of the Sorbian pupil, see especially Šatava (2005).



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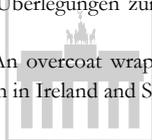
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