From Erasure to Recognition (and Back Again?): The Case of Flemish Sign Language

Mieke Van Herreweghe, Maartje De Meulder, and Myriam Vermeerbergen

Abstract

In this chapter we consider linguistic ideologies and deaf people’s attitudes toward Flemish Sign Language (VGT). First, we review the major historical steps with respect to the status of VGT. In this historical evolution, it can be shown that VGT has developed from complete erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2000) via implicit recognition within the VGT linguistic minority community to legal recognition by Flemish Parliament. This has gone hand in hand with changing attitudes within the Deaf community toward the status of VGT. Indeed, the 2006 recognition has unmistakably had an empowering effect in the Flemish Deaf community, even though the actual knowledge of the contents of the recognition decree may be rather meager. At the same time, new indications of erasure can be exposed in Flanders, which are leading to serious concerns within the Flemish Deaf community about the future of VGT and the community in which it is used.

Key Words: Flemish Sign Language, VGT, linguistic ideologies, language attitudes, recognition of sign languages, linguistic erasure

On April 26, 2006 Flemish Sign Language (Vlaamse Gebarentaal or VGT) was officially recognized as the language of the Flemish Deaf community by a decree adopted by Flemish Parliament (Stuk 729 (2005–2006)—Nr. 1). In the Flemish Deaf community this was considered a major milestone: There were more than 400 deaf people present on the Flemish Parliament premises at the time of voting. Exactly 5 years later, the Flemish Deaf community organized a big festival on the premises of Flemish Parliament to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the recognition in which again more than 500 people participated.

However, the journey to recognition was not a smooth one (Vermeerbergen & Van Herreweghe, 2008). A lot has changed vis-à-vis the status of VGT since its inception in the first Flemish deaf schools in the 19th century to its position today.

The first Flemish conference focusing on “signing” took place in Ghent on October 23, 1979. The central theme of the conference was the “Unification of the Flemish signs” and the use of signs—in the form of Signed Dutch—was promoted. In 1997, the Flemish Deaf community officially proclaimed to start promoting VGT rather than Signed Dutch and as such recognized the fact that VGT is a fully fledged language. This change had an almost immediate impact within the VGT community, mainly on interpreter training programs and on sign language courses for adult second-language learners. The evolution toward a higher status of VGT spread beyond the Deaf community and culminated in the symbolic recognition of VGT by Flemish Parliament in 2006. Therefore, VGT has developed from complete erasure, one of Irvine and Gal’s (2000) processes of linguistic ideology, to symbolic recognition by mainstream society and legal recognition by the Flemish government via implicit recognition within the VGT linguistic minority community: This recognition has in turn led to a greater empowerment
of the Flemish Deaf community and broader lessons about language, culture, and society. Yet at the same time new instances of erasure are appearing. In deaf education, the value of a bilingual-bicultural education is again being questioned. This, combined with medical, assistive-listening technologies, is actively rendering a lower status to VGT (and, by extension, Flemish deaf people). This leads to a schizoid situation with recognition of VGT and Flemish deaf people, on the one hand, and a renewed erasure, on the other, leading to uncertainties about the future of the Flemish Deaf community and its language. This chapter therefore looks at linguistic ideologies and deaf people’s attitudes toward VGT, in the past, the present, and in the future.

This chapter offers an overview of the major historical steps with respect to the status of VGT, from its inception in the first deaf schools in Flanders in the 19th century to its position today. Even through the chapter focuses on the Flemish situation, a similar path can be found in many western countries, even if the time periods and the final scenarios may be different. Five periods can be distinguished with milestones relevant to the Flemish situation which will be considered in chronological order. First will be the period before 1979 when the first Flemish Deaf community conference focusing on a form of signing was organized. That will be followed by a description of the period from 1979 until the mid-1990s, when VGT started to be promoted rather than signed Dutch, and then the mid-1990s in which new changes occurred in the acceptance of VGT and its community. The period from the mid-1990s to 2006, the year of the official recognition of VGT by the Flemish Parliament, will follow and, finally, the post-2006 era will be considered. Later sections of the chapter will deal with prerecognition language attitudes in the Flemish Deaf Community, the Decree on the Recognition of VGT itself, and postrecognition language attitudes in the Flemish Deaf community. Finally, we provide a brief look into the future of VGT and the Flemish Deaf community. However, before going into those developments it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the linguistic situation in Flanders, Belgium, and the Flemish Deaf community today.

Flanders, Belgium

Flemish Sign Language (VGT) is the language used by deaf and hearing signed Flemish people, which is the northern part of Belgium. In 1993, Belgium was transformed into a federalized monarchy with basically two states, Flanders in the north with currently about 6,000,000 inhabitants and Wallonia in the south with currently around 3,500,000 inhabitants, and three constitutionally recognized official languages: Dutch in Flanders, French in Wallonia, and German, which are spoken by only 74,000 people living in eastern Belgium close to Germany. Belgium’s capital, the city of Brussels, with about 1,000,000 inhabitants, is a bilingual territory and has its own governments (cf. http://www.libdef槟fr/la/languages/index.html). The federalization process has had as a consequence that today every Belgian belongs to a certain linguistic group so that legally there is parallel monolingualism (except for Brussels, which is officially bilingual). This also holds for Belgian deaf people, who are considered to be Flemish or Walloon and are regarded as being part of the linguistic majority groups of speakers of Dutch or French regardless of the language they use and the linguistic minority group to which they belong.

From Navekloos to Pevlado

The federalization of Belgium was a fact in 1993, but this was the result of a long process that also had consequences for the Deaf community. Until the end of the 1970s there was one national Deaf federation, Navekloos, which then split up into Flemish and Wallonian federations. Both the Flemish federation Pevlado (de Federatie van Vlaamse Doenoverorganisaties of the Federation of Flemish Deaf Organizations) and the Walloon federation FFS (Fédération Francophone des Sourds or the Francophone Federation of the Deaf) were founded in 1977. As a result of the separation, contacts between Flemish and Wallonian deaf people became less and less frequent, and this has had its effect on the development of the sign languages and also language varieties in both communities. Since then, there clearly has been a process of divergence (Van Herreweghe & Vlaeminck, 2009). The Flemish Deaf community is estimated to include maximally 6,000 deaf signers (Loots et al., 2003).

A Brief History of Sign Language Usage in Flanders Before 1979

In Flanders the first deaf school—a girl’s school—was set up by Canon Petrus Joseph Trief in Ghent in 1820. He sent the first teacher for a few months to the Paris institute for deaf children that was famous throughout Europe and in which a form of signed communication based on Old French Sign Language was used both as language of communication and to some extent as language of instruction (generally known as the “French method”). The teacher, Jean-Baptiste Bertrand, brought the French signs with him to Ghent and started using them in her own lessons. Shortly afterward, in 1825, Triest also established a school for deaf boys in Ghent, in which the teachers were two church brothers who had spent 2 years as interns at a deaf school in Groningen established by Guyot, who had learned the French method in Paris himself. In both institutes, the teachers were assisted by a deaf man, Louis De Stoop, who had been educated at the Paris institute (Buyens, 2005). As such, it is unmistakably the case that there are close links between Old French Sign Language and the sign language which was used in Flanders at the time, although due to fewer contacts ever time, the variants diverged from each other. Clearly, in the first years of deaf education in Flanders, a form of signing was generally accepted.

Over the years the attitude toward sign language gradually changed and more and more educators began to prefer the “oral method” of teaching deaf children through speaking and speechreading (if necessary supported by writing). Nevertheless, we can read in an 1876 text from the Ghent girls’ school, which at this point also favored oral education:

The method of signs retains its own advantages. The signs remain necessary for the first development of intelligence; they are necessary to teach abstract things, when religious and ethical classes are taught. Since the majority of the deaf-Mutes do not succeed in a distinct articulation or in a complete comprehension of the movement of the lips, it is necessary to supplement this with signs. The signs are faster and can more easily be understood in rapid discourse or conversations where lip-reading is of an insurmountable difficulty. The signs retain the universal language of the Deaf-Mutes, with no distinction of language or nation; it is therefore in their interest that they continue to practice language through signs, which is, after all, their natural language, whereas the spoken language that they themselves cannot hear, is for them an artificial and mechanical language. (Buyens, 2005, p. 85) (our translation)

The international trend toward oral education culminated in 1880 in the infamous Second International Congress for the Improvement of Deaf-Mutes (commonly referred to as the Milan Congress), where sign language was “disapproved in deaf education.” The result was that in deaf schools (first in Europe, later also outside Europe), sign languages were banned from the classroom and, by extension, from society. This is a clear instance of a type of linguistic erasure which Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 38) call “erasure”:

Erasure is the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away. So, for example, a social group or a language may be imagined as homogenous, its internal variation disregarded. Because a linguistic ideology is a rationalizing element, that does not fit its interpretive structure—that cannot be seen to fit—must either be ignored or transformed. Erasure in ideological representation does not, however, necessarily mean actual eradication of the awkward element, whose very existence may be unobserved or unwanted.

Obviously the erasure of signed languages from deaf education did not happen overnight. In 1885, three years after the establishment of the Brussels deaf school for girls, maintained that hardly half of the deaf schools he knew were in favor of the pure oral method as it was advocated by the Italian schools and educators (Schiefler & Raemdonck, 2007, p. 70). In that same year the Third International Congress for the Improvement of Deaf-Mutes was organized in Brussels. Although the hearing delegates, who were mostly educators from deaf schools abroad, outnumbered the deaf delegates by 230 to 21, the deaf delegates had quite a strong sense of militancy. One such delegate was Charles Boland, an artist-painter living in Antwerp. He took the stand and strongly pleaded for deaf people’s right to decide on the type of communication that was demanded by deaf people in the method of instruction. Nonetheless, his views were not included in the final congress recommendations (Schiefler & Raemdonck, 2007, pp. 90 and 130).

Gradually, in the following decades, oralism became more dominant. In Flanders, although this is an oversimplification, it seems that in the course of the 20th century in most of the girls’ schools, run by nuns, signs were completely banned from the schools: No contact with deaf adults was possible at school and no information was imparted about the existing Deaf clubs (see later). In most of the boys’ schools, run by church brothers, in contrast, signs were still used and, in most cases, not in the school. Contact with male deaf adults was
encouraged, and information about Deaf societies was distributed to the pupils. Clear examples can be found in Buyens (2005), which contains a number of interviews with older deaf people. Some deaf women talk about their time at the Brussels deaf girls’ school in the 1940s and 1950s:

The education that we received was basically speech training. We had to speak as much as possible. The use of signs was forbidden. When we did sign we were punished and we lost marks so that our exam results were not so good. Sometimes we also had to peel potatoes in the basement as punishment. At the playground and in our spare time we were not allowed to sign either. The sisters kept a close eye on us. When we signed, the invigilating sister would take a piece of paper from her sacrapul and would write our names on it. Afterwards we would be called to her to be punished. (Buyens, 2005, pp. 167–168) (our translation)

From the Ghent girls’ school there are similar testimonies (from the same period):

We were not allowed to sign at school, not at the playground and not in our spare time. According to me one of the reasons was that the sisters did not know any signs and that when we would sign with each other in our spare time they would not know what we were talking about and that was unacceptable. Sometimes our hands were bound, by the sisters behind our backs. I remember that when I was at vocational school and I signed that I was punished. My parents were deaf, so I knew the deaf world. At school nothing was said by the sisters about these meetings. The sisters did not like it when the pupils would go to the gate-teachers of the deaf. I remember a conversation between my father and the headmistress at the time. She knew that my father attended the meetings since he himself was on the board of the deaf club in Ghent. She said that, when my father went to a gate-teacher, he could certainly bring me to the institute and could pick me up again afterwards. Luckily my father refused that he would take care of me himself, also during the gatherings of the deaf. (Buyens, 2005, pp. 96–98) (our translation)

The situation seemed to have been quite different for deaf boys. Buyens (2005, p. 128) includes a photograph of the 125th anniversary of the Ghent institute for deaf boys at which one person is giving a speech and one of the church brothers is interpreting in a form of sign language; at least in the picture his hands are clearly moving. There is also an interview with an 85-year-old deaf man who testifies that when he was young he went to the Ghent school and they were allowed to use signs on the playground and during spare time in the classroom. Moreover, he claims:

At school there only were church brother-teachers and they all knew signs. It also happened that the church brothers signed in the classroom, because it was important that the deaf pupils would understand the teacher. Good communication was very important. And when we signed in the classroom we were not punished. Signs were not forbidden. (Buyens, 2005, p. 133) (our translation)

Something similar seems to have happened at the boys’ school in Limburg:

That is why at the personnel meeting of November 1943 brother Valterius suggested to teach the older pupils by means of signs. That way it would be easier for them to make contact with former students and the same could happen at teachers. These were held in sign and were organized for former students. (Buyens, 2005, p. 211) (our translation)

These testimonies clearly illustrate that even though sign language officially was erased from deaf education, considerable communicative practices in the classroom and certainly in the residential part of the institutes were quite different. Unfortunately we cannot go back and observe those classroom practices, which is why testimonies of older deaf adults are so valuable. They seem to confirm that in most schools there was a clear difference between the education of the deaf boys and that of the deaf girls. However, as mentioned earlier, the distinction between girls’ and boys’ schools may be an oversimplification. Moreover, in the course of time, schools did not always adhere to the same policies as becomes clear from the following testimony from a deaf woman who went to the Bruges deaf school:

In the beginning when I was at school we were allowed to sign, that was no problem. We were allowed to talk to each other in signs, in both class and during our spare time, so at the playground as well. Since my parents were deaf, I already used Sign Language and I could talk a lot in my own mother tongue, the Sign Language. But in 1953 when I was 12 years old and was in the class of sister Bernarda and miss Monique, the hearing aid was introduced. Then we had to wear a hearing aid and we got a lot of auditoiy training. From that moment it was forbidden to sign in the classroom. Speaking was the most important thing. Sister Bernarda and miss Monique were very strict in class and would do everything to teach the pupils how to speak. At the playground we were still allowed to sign. (Buyens, 2005, p. 267) (our translation)

What stands out in many of the testimonies is that the children of deaf parents, the native signers, were crucial for the continuation of sign language and Deaf culture in the school, as is well-known and generally accepted in the field of Deaf studies (Lane, 1984). Outside the schools, sign languages, and also the sign language variants used in Flanders (De Weerdt, Vican, Van Herreweghe & Vermeersen, 2003), flourished among deaf adults, especially in the Deaf clubs. The latter are among the oldest societies in Belgium. Every major town and many of the smaller towns have a Deaf club, so that in Flanders there are about 20 Deaf clubs in total. Among them there are already their 100th anniversary. The club in Ghent was founded in 1860, the one in Sint-Niklaas in 1896, the one in Aalst in 1898, etc. Around the turn of the 19th century, deaf people, who felt that their opinions had not been heard at the Milan and Brussels congresses and who were inspired by examples in the United States and France, took the first initiatives to organize national congresses and to establish national federations. This led to the foundation of the first national deaf federation in Belgium in 1901, that is, the Belgische Bond der Doofstenenverenigingen—Fédération Belge des Sociétés de Sourds-Muets (the Belgian Federation of Deaf mute Societies). One of the main aims was to join forces so as to gain impact on decisions with respect to, for instance, educational methods in deaf education and the appointment of deaf teachers but also more generally to improve the lives of Belgian deaf people (Scheirs & Raedonck, 2007, pp. 90–97).

Unfortunately, due to conflicts in the Belgian Deaf community at the time, these national initiatives were short-lived. The oppositions were mainly situated on three axes: (1) there were differences of opinion as to how to approach the problems strategically, that is, should only deaf people be involved into decision-making processes (a more principled approach regarding deaf people as equal to hearing people), or should hearing people be involved as well (a more pragmatic approach allowing for charity-driven initiatives); (2) since this was Belgium at the turn of the century, it should be no surprise that there were also politico-ideological differences of opinion mostly along the Catholic versus liberal line and (3) again in Belgium at the turn of the century there were linguistic conflicts between the French- and in the Dutch-speaking populations, which led to conflicts in the Deaf community as to which written languages should be used (with a dominance of French over Dutch). All of these issues resulted in a severely divided Deaf community which could not make a real and united stance in favor of sign language in deaf education (or what was then called “the mixed method,” that is, the use of both signed and spoken language in education). Nevertheless, there were a number of attempts (in the form of congresses, petitions, and the like), such as this emotional plea by Mona, president of the Flemish Deaf mute Movement (founded in 1906, but of which there are no records after 1909):

Well now, isn’t it sad that, in this day and age in the middle of a civilized and refined society, in which there are continuous deliberations about feelings of fraternity and solidarity, the small, weak circles of deaf-mutes need to be constantly fearful of the safeguarding of their property: the sign language, the light of their eyes. Nothing is more touching and can trigger more feelings than the kind of religious respect which the deaf have preserved for their language and for their archaically habits. It can build on an ancient civilization and which besroes us on a glowing passion for our right, and we shall, throughout the centuries, succeed with a diligent care in maintaining our ownership. (Scheirs & Raedonck, 2007, pp. 137–138) (our translation)

Consequently, it took until 1936 for a new federation to be established, that is, Navelados, which was the precursor of today’s Vevelato (see earlier). By then, oralism had become quite strong and opposition against it very weak so that antagonistic actions were seemed too late.

From 1979 to the Early 1990s

The year 1979 was an important year for the Deaf community in Flanders, because Velavo organized the first conference focusing on signing titled “Unification of the Flemish signs” in Ghent on October 23. This was the first time since the early 1900s that signing officially became visible in Flanders. As a result of the conference, Velavo decided to develop and promote a signed system—not VGT—called “Nederlands met
Gebaren' (Signed Dutch). There were a number of reasons for this.

First, at that point, Flemish people, including Flemish deaf people, did not realize that the communication system used in the Deaf community was indeed a language. In 1974, the president of Navelakos held a closing speech at its National Conference in which he stated that:

Navelakos is not in favor of education by means of Sign Language. It emphasizes the need for the deaf person to be allowed to express himself in a way which comes natural to him, otherwise he would lose his identity. We must have a sign language which respects the linguistic rules. That is the best way to counter linguistic deficiencies. (Bayeris, 2001, p. 76) (foot translation)

This quote clearly illustrates that, on the one hand, deaf people recognized that they had their own "natural" form of communication which was crucial for their own identity, but that on the other hand, they did not consider this natural form of communication a language since it lacked a "proper" grammar. Because it was deemed necessary for deaf people to develop a "real" language, the combination of the grammar of Dutch and those "natural" signs was favored.

Second, "the people in charge," that is, the people who held Fevialdo's key positions, were either children of deaf adults (CODAs)—commonly used to refer to hearing people with deaf parents—or deaf people with good spoken language skills. This was because it was felt that in order to be in charge you needed to know a "real," fully developed language. But it also showed the tendency to believe that those with a better knowledge of Dutch were considered to be the "more intelligent" deaf people. One of the results was that Dutch clearly had a higher status than the language that was used within the Deaf community itself. This is strikingly in line with Goffman's (1986, p. 159) analysis of the ambivalent position of representatives of linguistic minority groups:

In any case, one regularly finds in the same representative the capacity to be more "normal" in manner than are most of the members of his category who orient themselves in this direction while at the same time he can command more of the native idiom than those of his category who are oriented in this direction. And where a representative does not have this capacity to manage two faces he will find himself under some pressure to develop it.

Third, it was assumed that a communication system with a "unified" lexicon and a "good" (Dutch) grammar would meet with less resistance in the hearing community. Loncke (1983, p. 61) maintained:

The Flemish deaf state that a pure sign language is less acceptable for a high level variety, because they think the grammatical rules of the spoken language should be respected. It is clear that this attitude must be understood as a compromise in a country with a strong oral tradition. In Flanders it still appears to be unacceptable to argue for a pure sign language. It seems that this is the real reason why the deaf propose a kind of Signed Dutch, presumably hoping that this will be more easily accepted among educationalists. But implicitly, the inferiority of pure sign languages seems to be assumed.

Finally, it was thought that a sign language consisting of at least five regional varieties and a "primitive," unanalyzed, and unstructured grammar would most likely be frowned upon by the hearing majority. This can be linked to Irvine and Gal's (2000) second process of linguistic ideology, namely, "fractal recursivity," which involves "the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (p. 38). That is, the fact that there was no standard signs was seen as only regional varieties and were used as an argument against the use of these "fractioned" regional varieties, although they had developed naturally, and in favor of a "unified" or artificial signed system so that it would be acceptable to the hearing non-signing majority. Interestingly, the same fractal recursivity, although in the opposite direction, can be found a decade later in the discussion of the Flemish public broadcasting company not to employ sign language interpreters to render the spoken television news accessible to Flemish deaf signers but to opt for closed captioning in written Dutch (the first captioned programs were broadcast in 1981; Vrech, 2000). After a couple of meetings of the Flemish public broadcasting company with representatives of Fevialdo, it was decided to be undesirable for a national public television company to broadcast this fractioned regional sign language usage, so sign language and sign language interpretation were completely erased in favor of Dutch subtitles. However, from 2012 onward, as one of the results of the recognition in Flemish Parliament of VGT as a fully fledged language variety, not as a collection of fractioned regional varieties, both the daily news broadcast for children and the main Flemish news broadcast are being interpreted into VGT.

In 1979, Fevialdo decided to take initiatives to promote and develop Signed Dutch courses for hearing people, but also for deaf people, although these were not very successful and this idea was soon abandoned. We assume that one of the reasons why the courses for deaf people were unsuccessful was that in order to master Signed Dutch well, one had to have a sufficiently proficient knowledge of Dutch, which many deaf people did not have. In the same year, Fevialdo also supported the foundation of a Total Communication (see Chapter 3, this volume) experiment in one deaf school, which implemented the use of Signed Dutch as a medium of instruction—the other deaf schools maintained an oralist approach. Interestingly, this was a former boys' school run by church brothers of which the brother-principal was a CODA and some of the teachers were quite good signers. Fevialdo furthermore instigated the foundation of an Interpreter training program and, in October 1981, the first class started. Many of the people involved in the implementation of the Total Communication program were from one deaf school that were also involved in setting up the interpreter training program. Fevialdo also decided to develop "unified" signs and a sign committee was established with deaf signers from the different regions (Loncke, 1986). For 15 years, the committee met monthly to select a standard "unified" signs for each Dutch word taken from a frequency list of published 200 Dutch words (Geyssens, Ostyn, Snoeys, & Vlaeminck, 1989). Some of the signs that were accepted into the "unified" lexicon were originally used in one or more of the VGT varieties, while others were completely invented. As a result, both selected and invented signs were labeled as "unified" signs (Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2004).

At the same time, while Fevialdo promoted Signed Dutch, a number of initiatives centering around VGT and sign languages in general were undertaken in Flanders and in Europe. The First European Congress on Sign Language Research was held in Brussels in 1982 (Loncke, Boeyen-Braem, & Lebrun, 1984), and the second became the first in a series of European sign language research conferences. At the Vrije Universiteit Brussel "Sign Language," not Signed Dutch, was offered as an elective course from 1992 onward. In 1988, a European resolution was passed in which the European Parliament called on the European Commission to put forward a proposal to the Council of Europe concerning recognition of the sign languages used by deaf people in each Member State. All of these originally had a negligible impact on the Flemish Deaf community or on Flemish mainstream society. Gradually, however, the international movement toward a higher status of sign languages and the securing of this status in legislation also influenced Flanders and the Flemish Deaf community, leading to the next phase.

A Transitional Phase: The Mid-1990s

The mid-1990s seem to be a turning point in the attitudes of the Flemish Deaf community toward VGT, to the extent that in 1997 Fevialdo officially rejected the use of Signed Dutch (Boonen, Van Herreweghe, & Vermeerbergen, 2004; Vermeerbergen & Van Herreweghe, 2008). We are inclined to think that this fact played a major role in this process.

First, a number of changes were initiated by Fevialdo itself. In the early 1990s, Fevialdo set up "leadership courses" or "deaf awareness courses" for young deaf adults. De Clerck (2007, p. 9) described these as follows:

Deaf people received information about deaf education in Flanders, services for deaf people, government services and organizations for people with disabilities, beginning scientific research on deaf people and sign language in Flanders, and international organizations for deaf people such as the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the European Union of the Deaf (EUD, formerly ECRS). The course encouraged deaf people to take responsibility and participate in existing governmental structures and institutions for deaf people.

In 1996, a new board of directors was elected in Fevialdo. Whereas before most of the key positions in the board were held by CODAs or deaf people with good skills in spoken language, who regarded Dutch rather than VGT as their first language, the new key positions were occupied by younger deaf signers, most of whom had previously taken part in the leadership courses and or study trips abroad which will be discussed later.

Second, Flemish deaf people's views and opinions on "sign language" were influenced by international contacts and as such by the international movement toward acceptance of sign languages as high-status languages. In 1993-1994, as part of a European Horizon project titled "Training for Deaf People for Education and Employment," Fevialdo established a
short intensive teacher-training program in Signed Dutch for young deaf adults. 16 deaf teachers, some in Fevlado’s own Signed Dutch course, some in the Ghent interpreter training program, were enrolled. Half of the program—that is, 40 hours—was organized in Flanders and focused mainly on grammatical aspects of VGT, whereas for the other half of the program participants traveled to the Centre for Deaf Studies in Bristol, where a British deaf person (Clark Denmark) offered an intensive course in “Teaching Methods 1.” Van Herrewege and Vermeerenbergen (2009, p. 316) claimed:

We are inclined to see this training programme, and then especially the week in Bristol with the charismatic influence of Clark Denmark, as a cornerstone in the development ideas of sign language usage in the Flemish Deaf community. Some of the participants started to doubt the usefulness of Signed Dutch for teaching purposes and wanted to change their own teaching materials (including the “unified” sign) towards Flemish Sign Language. Mainly for practical reasons this could not be accomplished immediately, but the experience initiated discussions within Fevlado as to the pros and cons of Signed Dutch versus Flemish Sign Language (although at the time the latter was simply labelled “sign language”).

Besides the intensive week in Bristol, a number of other trips abroad were organized in the early to mid-1990s:

Between 1992 and 1994, the Flemish Federation of the Deaf organized trips to Denmark (1992), the Netherlands (1993), the United States (1994), and England (1994). In Denmark and the Netherlands, the group received information about the national deaf federation, organizations of parents of deaf children, sign language classes, services for deaf people, and educational opportunities, among other things. When visiting the Danish national deaf federation, deaf people also learned about bilingual education, the perception of deaf people as a linguistic minority, and how deaf people could run their own organization and participate in government decision making. In the United States, at Gallaudet University, the group followed a one-week schedule including meetings with university president 1. King Jordan, Gallaudet professor Yerker Anderson, and others; visits to the university library, the W.E.B. Du Bois Education Demonstration School, and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf; and presentations on study at Gallaudet. The Flemish deaf people were impressed with the use of sign language everywhere on campus and in all classrooms. (De Clerck. 2007, p. 9)

Third, the mid-1990s is also the period in which the first linguistic research on VGT was published, mainly on grammatical aspects of VGT (Van Herrewege, 1995; Vermeerenbergen, 1996, 1997). These research results were further disseminated among the Deaf community through guest lectures in Deaf clubs and symposia organized within the Deaf community, through a course on grammatical aspects of VGT (taught in VGT) spread over 10 days, and through a “signing book,” that is, a video in which the results of the linguistic research on VGT were presented using VGT as the medium of communication (Vermeerenbergen, 1995).

The overall effect was that, increasingly, deaf people, including those who were not very active in Fevlado, began to realize that VGT was a fully fledged language. In the final report on the status of “sign language” in Flanders that was published in the aftermath of a 1996 “European Sign Languages Project” (Timmermans, 2005), Lathouwers, at the time president of Fevlado, stated:

Some years ago, Signed Dutch was promoted as a means of communication of the deaf with the hearing world. This proved to be wrong because deaf people could not identify with this artificial language. There was also a risk that deaf people would consider their own natural sign language with its own specific characteristics as inferior and incomprehensible. Since there was insufficient scientific research into the “sign language,” efforts to select Dutch as a “better” language for communication was perhaps understandable. But after a couple of years during which information on the characteristics of the sign language had been gathered in a scientifically sound way it has become clear that sign language could equally be considered as a fully fledged language and that it does not have to be inferior to any other language. Hence, Deaf awareness has developed in Flanders, along with a sense of language and culture which eliminates a feeling of inferiority that some deaf fellow-sufferers (sic) have had. (Lathouwers, 1998a, p. 29) (our translation)

These changes in linguistic ideologies toward VGT seem to have culminated in 1997 when Fevlado officially rejected Signed Dutch, replaced their own Signed Dutch courses by VGT courses, and organized one event after another involving VGT: There was a debate within Fevlado’s general assembly about standardization of VGT (see, for example, Van Herrewege & Vermeerenbergen 2000), the Flemish Sign Language Centre was founded, and within Fevlado a “Sign Language Unit” was established, immediately concentrating on linguistic aspects of VGT such as finger spelling and the name of the language (see later). Fevlado’s annual National Conference had as its central theme the recognition of “Flemish Belgian Sign Language.” At the time its president stated that this recognition means a lot more to us than just recognizing our language, it is also about accepting and respecting us as a certain group of people, people with our own language, own culture, own history and background and above all, people with an identity. This is what we ask for respect. (Degryse & Vandevelde, 1998, p. 3) (our own translation)

Indeed, the 1998 report of the conference stated that Fevlado did not only want recognition of VGT but also “acceptance of our individuality, our culture and our world as a unique and valuable part of Flemish and Belgian society” (Lathouwers, 1998b, p. 4). It was expected that recognition of VGT would have the following consequences: use of VGT in deaf education, freer and more frequent use of VGT resulting in a beneficial influence on the further development of VGT, greater visibility of VGT in society with more hearing people learning to sign (because they would have more opportunities to use sign language), better qualified interpreters, better access to higher education resulting in more qualified deaf people and more opportunities for deaf people (Degryse & Vandevelde, 1998).

An important issue is that even though the Flemish Deaf community abandoned Signed Dutch in favor of VGT, the situation in the deaf schools was quite different in the mid-1990s. Apart from one school, which in 1998 started to offer bilingual-bicultural education in which VGT was used as the first language, in all other schools, most children were either placed in a strictly oral educational setting, or in mono-lateral programs that give support to spoken Dutch and speechreading by means of written Dutch, finger spelling, and/or Signed Dutch. Nevertheless, in some deaf schools there were some (extramural) VGT and/or Deaf culture classes taught by deaf assistant teachers, so there was some openness toward VGT (see also De Clerck, 2009).

From the Late 1990s to 2006: Corpus and Status Planning Activities Leading to Recognition

From the late 1990s onward, corpus planning activities clearly focused on VGT and no longer on Signed Dutch. Some examples of such activities since the mid-1990s are the development of teaching materials by the Flemish Sign Language Centre; projects focusing on lexical gaps in the educational domains of mathematics, history, and geography by the Flemish Sign Language Centre in collaboration with Fevlado and the Flemish deaf schools (Van Herrewege & Vermeerenbergen, 2003); and the first freely accessible Internet dictionary for VGT—Dutch / VGT, online since 2004 (http://gebaarden.ugent.be) and published as a DVD in 2008 (Van Herrewege et al., 2008).

From the late 1990s onward there were also clear tokens of a surging Deaf empowerment in Flanders (De Clerck, 2007) going hand in hand with status-planning activities leading to a rising status of VGT, both within the Deaf community and in mainstream society. One example is the name of the language (see later). Another example is the fact that in 2000, a sign was added to the official curriculum in deaf education, although only as an optional subject. In the same period, the results of a large-scale research into status and standardization of VGT (De Weerdt, Vanhecke, Van Herrewege, & Vermeerenbergen, 2003), the use of signs in deaf education (Maes, Rymen & Ghesquière, 2003), and demographics of the Flemish Deaf community (Loots et al., 2003) were published and advice was given to the relevant governmental cabinets (Loots, Maes, Van Herrewege, & Vermeerenbergen, 2002).

Emblematic of the change in ideology are the developments with respect to the name of the language, which is in line with Irvine and Gál’s 2000 third semantic process in ideologies of linguistic differentiation, iconization: Iconization involves a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or variates) and the social images with which they are linked. Linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence. (Irvine & Gál, 2000, p. 37)

Once the language is as it is used by the Deaf community in Flanders officially received a name, it became iconic for its social image as well. For a long time deaf people in Flanders did not have a name...
of the Deaf community and in mainstream society—of the Flemish Deaf community as being a legitimate cultural and linguistic minority. 

Pre-re cognition Language Attitudes in the Flemish Deaf Community

Despite progress, there seemed to be a gap between, on the one hand, deaf activists who had been on the barricades for quite some time to achieve recognition and, on the other, grandparents deaf people who did not always seem to be convinced of the status of VGT as a language. In 2003, Verhelst, a deaf researcher, interviewed 30 West Flemish Deaf people in VGT about their perspectives on d/Deafness (Van Herreweghe & Verhelst, 2004; Verhelst, 2003). They belonged to four different age groups: 12–20 years (five interviewees), 21–40 years (seven interviewees), 41–60 years (ten interviewees) and 61–80 years (eight interviewees). Of the interviewees, 23 were born deaf, seven were not; 21 were active members of the local Deaf club, nine were not; and five had taken a course on Deaf culture, 25 had not. Asked whether they would call themselves disabled or members of a linguistic-cultural minority group, only three people (aged 21–40 years) said yes; a majority was said by “linguistic minority group” and only one person considered herself part of one, while two interviewees claimed to be part of a linguistic minority group as a group, but on an individual, personal level they would consider themselves disabled, depending on time and place. Nine interviewees would explicitly call themselves disabled, of whom five were in the oldest age group. Eighteen interviewees stated that they would be certainly not disabled, since they would only use that term for people in a wheelchair, people with Down syndrome, visually impaired people, and so on. They were simply “deaf.” All interviewees stated that with deaf people they communicate in “sign language” or in “signs.” Strikingly, nobody called the language “Flemish Sign Language.” With hearing people, even with sign language interpreters, they all claimed to use “voice plus signs” (and sometimes body language), while one person only mentioned “writing.” Verhelst also queried whether the informants were proud of being able to sign and/or to speak. Here a striking difference could be found between the youngest two age groups, who all claimed that they were proud of being able to sign and that being able to speak was “normal,” and the oldest two age groups, who were all very proud of being able to speak, but only some were 

for the language they used, mostly because they did not consider it a proper language. They were just as critical to their communication patterns as “signing” or even “pointing,” but not as “language.” When researchers started to describe the sign language as it was used in the Flemish Deaf community in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they felt the need for a name or a label of some kind. This is where “fractal recursivity” again played a role, but this time in a different direction.

Because researchers felt the need to make a distinction between the sign language as it is used in Belgium and sign languages used elsewhere, they could not simply use “sign language,” but opted for Belgian Sign Language (Losnac, 1986). This con- 
curred with the intuitions many Flemish deaf peo-
ple had about the fact that the sign language used in Flanders was very different from the one used in the Netherlands (even though the hearing communities speak the same language, that is, Dutch), but that it is closer to the one used in Wallonia (although the Wallon hearing community speaks French). However, when more linguistic research was carried out from the early-1990s onwards, there was not enough linguistic evidence to know whether the difference between the sign languages used in Flanders and Wallonia were sufficiently significant to talk about two different sign languages. Hence, in the 1990s the term “Flemish-Belgian Sign Language” was used for the sign languages used in Flanders. However, at the time end of the 1990s (a decade in which the federalization process in Belgium was a hot political issue in mainstream society), the name of the language became a gravely debated issue within the Flemish Deaf community. 

Fevlado’s monthly magazine even received letters in favor of or against the label “Flemish-Belgian Sign Language.” 

Instigated by the aforementioned “Sign Language Unit” within Fevlado, a debate was organized at its General Assembly in October 2000 at which deaf people from all the regional Deaf clubs were present (51 members in total). The three options that were put forward were “Flemish Sign Language,” “Flemish-Belgian Sign Language,” and “Belgian Sign Language.” An overwhelming majority of 50 out of the 51 votes cast chose “Flemish Sign Language.” This choice was confirmed at Fevlado’s Annual General Assembly in 2001 and has become the official name since then. “Since a language reflect(s) the cultural or spiritual essence of a collectivity of speakers” (Irving & Gal, 2000, p. 58), the iconization of the language also had its effect on the proud of being able to sign. For most of the other respondents, signing was just the “normal” thing to do, but with a word or as signing of people, aged 21–40 years, stated that VGT was a fully fledged language, and one of them actually was not sure and had doubts about whether the lexicon was extended enough for a fully fledged language. The others sim- ply did not know. In general, it was found that over the past decades there had been obvious changes in attitudes toward and suppositions about (their own) d/Deafness and that in their community patterns VGT seemed to be better accepted but that active knowledge of aspects of Deaf culture, including VGT, was critically lacking. As a consequence, it seems that so much effort has been put into convincing hearing, mainstream society of the linguistic status of VGT, that new ways need to be looked for to disseminate that same type of information into the Deaf community. In this respect it is also striking that today the more active propagators of “Deaf identity” among young Deaf people have either been raised (strictly) orally, and/or have a form of acquired deafness. It seems that access to information (mainly in Dutch), and to mainstream education (by means of sign language (interpreter) is the catalytic agent. The future will tell whether this will become a more general tendency. (Van Herreweghe & Vermeeren, 2006, p. 305)

One aspect, however, that continuously was talked about was the use of the language. The Decree was the recognition of its language. As mentioned before, this was an old demand that very much came to the forefront in the early 2000s.

The Decree on the Recognition of Flemish Sign Language

Through the Belgian federalization process, language policy became the responsibility of the communities, which can, in their own linguistic region, arrange language use through legisla- tion, called “decrees.” On October 21, 2003, “la langue des signes de Belgique francophone” (French Belgian Sign Language, LSF/ B) was recognized by the Parliament of the Francophone Community in Belgium. This fact went back to a breakthrough through the Flemish Deaf community. In 2004, Helga Stevens, at the time also director of the European Union of the Deaf, was elected as the first deaf MP in Flemish Parliament and thanks to continual lobbying by Fevlado, some Flemish political parties put the recognition of VGT in their pre-election pro-

grams. However, it was not in the new government memorandum and in 2004, a group of young, mostly deaf people founded DAF (the "Deaf Action Party"), with an option of an entire generation VGT. They decided to use the Flemish "right to petition" and nearly immediately started a peti-
tion which was subsequently submitted to Flemish Parliament in 2005 as the largest petition ever sub-
mission (71,330 signatures). This was followed by a hearing in Flemish Parliament where representatives of the Flemish Deaf association, DAF, the Wallonian Deaf association, and linguistic experts informed the MPs what an official recognition of VGT would entail. At the same time Stevens, together with a few other MPs, took the initiative to draft a decree proposal. During the drafting stage there were extensive negotiations with DAF, Fevlado, the Flemish Sign Language Centre, and the Flemish political majority parties as well as with the autho-
rized minister of Culture, Bert Anciaux. Less than a year later a proposal for a decree was submitted, and on April 26, 2006, the decree was adopted by Flemish Parliament, immediately followed by cele-
bations throughout the Flemish Deaf community. 

There were at least two other facilitating factors in the eventual decision to recognize VGT by main- stream society—or at least by Flemish Parliament. The first one is the fact that on a daily basis, MPs were confronted with VGT and sign language interpreters since the election of Helga Stevens as first deaf MP. Seeing the language regularly being used for political debates was another parliamentary purposes clearly had a substantial impact on non-
signers’ linguistic attitudes and ideologies toward it. The other facilitating factor is the fact that now the language had a name and, as such, also clear linguistic boundaries coexisting with the region of Flanders over which Flemish Parliament has author-

Article 2 of the decree as it was accepted in 2006” stated:

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 identification role. Flemish Sign Language is hereafter recognized. (our translation)

The decree on the recognition of VGT was mainly inspired by the decree on the recognition of LSF in Wallonia. 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 organization, co-organization or support of sensitizing activities" (our translation) (Art. 7 of the Decree), and (4) the recognition and funding by the Flemish Government of one centre of expertise with respect to VGT (that is, the aforementioned Flemish Sign Language Centre).

Interestingly, Reglaeyen (2010, p. 159) evaluated the decree as follows:

"Perhaps the strongest recognition to be found in this EU Act is the Decree Houden de Ekenning van de Vlaamse Gebarentaal (Decree on the Recognition of the Flemish Sign Language) passed on April 26, 2006 (SOOK 272 [2006-7966]; Nr. 1), by the Flemish Parliament, which calls for the symbolic recognition of Flemish Sign Language, creates a commission for advising the government about the measures related to Flemish Sign Language, and establishes mechanisms for funding for the research and development of Flemish Sign Language."

According to Article 3 of the Decree, the Flemish Sign Language Advisory Board (cf. the second measure mentioned earlier) consists of a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 people and contains at least one member of each of the following groups:

1. Organizations of deaf signers
2. Parents of deaf children who use VGT in their child's upbringing
3. Experts concerning deaf children's upbringing and education using VGT
4. Dutch Sign Language teachers
5. Experts concerning VGT-Dutch/Dutch-VGT interpreting
6. Researchers with expertise concerning VGT
7. Researchers with expertise concerning Deaf studies
8. Experts concerning the artistic use of sign language, Deaf culture, or sign language media

Moreover, the Decree states that at least half of the members have to be deaf signers. If not enough deaf candidates can be found, a new call has to be launched. Not more than two thirds of the members can be of the same sex. Since 2008—the first meeting was in the fall of 2008—the Advisory Board has met about every month and has discussed various topics relating to sign language interpreting, sign language in the media, sign language in education and Deaf culture and took the initiative to revise the Decree.

The Advisory Board is still quite unique for sign language recognition legislation and has been mentioned by, for example, New Zealand, as an example of good practice (Human Rights Commission, 2013). Still, as an evaluation of the functioning of the Advisory Board (De Meulder, 2012) pointed out that its emancipatory aim, the ownership of deaf signers over aspects of sign language planning as clearly put forward in the recognition Decree is not yet realized due to different reasons. The newly appointed committee, however, began working in January 2012 and has more (highly educated) deaf members, a sign that change is already underway.

In line with the third measure, since 2007 the Flemish government has funded VGT projects for about €57,000 per year. This has proven to be very important for the sensitization and visibility of VGT in Flemish society. The funding—although limited—has also been crucial for the development of some open, not regularly funded organizations whose aims are linked to VGT. Due to the funding already existing organizations could expand their operation and new organizations have been established. The campaign "Flemish Sign Language is alive and kicking" with a 30-second TV commercial on national television in January 2008 and accompanying flyers and Web site (www.vlaamsgebarentaal.be) is an example of the result of this funding. Other examples are an 8-day training program for deaf presenters and translators in the visual media, the production of the first nursery rhyme in VGT which were published on two DVDs (see http://www.vgt.be/bestehoek/vijfien-vingers-en-een-hoofd and http://www.vgt.be/bestehoek/vijfien-vingers-en-ee-hoofden), and a holiday camp for deaf children and their siblings focusing on VGT acquisition (see http://www.vgtboomer.be).

Due to the fourth measure, between 2007 and 2011 the Flemish Sign Language Centre received 650,000 per year with which they could appoint two part-time linguistic researchers to focus on documemtating grammatical aspects of VGT. They have developed a methodological framework and have worked on plural formation and classifiers in VGT (see http://www.vgt.be). In 2012, the center received additional funding of €80,000 per year for at least another 4 years and is currently working on elaboration of the dictionary (http://gebarentuigenen.be).

McKee (2011, p. 139), on the recognition of VGT, stated that this fourth measure in the decree "is vital to supporting the status and potential dissemination of a suppressed language." This is indeed the case—especially given the scarcity of fundamental research on VGT at Flemish universities, which is a striking aspect of organizing courses for both deaf and hearing people. As such, the interviewees had quite a diverse profile.

All but two interviewees clearly claimed that VGT is a fully fledged language. Two interviewees (both 59 years old, both not active in any Deaf club anymore) did think so, but they were not 100% sure. They felt that Dutch has a grammar and a grammar has "sentences," but VGT only has "words," no "sentences," and therefore they were not sure what to answer. They added: "We don't really talk Flemish Sign Language. We talk with signs" (our translation). Nevertheless, it is very striking that all of the interviewees clearly use the name "Flemish Sign Language," that 2003 interviewees (Verheije, 2003), of whom nobody gave the language a name. Furthermore, all interviewees claimed that they would definitely not call themselves disabled, but that they are members of a linguistic minority group. Three interviewees added that in the past they thought they were disabled, for example, "In the past I was a deaf assistant teacher and a course on Deaf Culture has been developed that is used in most secondary deaf schools now (Werkgroep CORA-Dovencultuur, 2011). However, today, more and more deaf children are being mainstreamed from an early age onward, with or without a sign language interpreter or a notetaker (De Raat & Lichtert, 2009; Vermeersbergen, Van Herreweghe, Smessert, & De Weerdt, 2012).

Postrecognition Language Attitudes in the Flemish Deaf Community

In order to get a better insight into postrecognition language attitudes in the Flemish Deaf community, we interviewed two professors in August 2014 in VGT? We certainly cannot claim that they are representative for the whole Deaf community, but it does give us some insights into possible changing/changing attitudes and it does warrant a more large-scale study, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Of the eight deaf people, four were aged between 35 and 40 years and four were aged between 55 and 70 years. Six of the interviewees were born deaf, whereas two became deaf in early life; four were very active members of Deaf societies, whereas four had been passive members in the past but were not anymore; and six interviewees had never taken any courses on Deaf culture or Deafhood, whereas one had taken a Fevlabo Deaf culture course in the fairly remote past, and the other had fairly recently taken a Deaflhood course (see Kunster & De Meulder, 2013) organized by Fevlabo-Diversia, the sister organization of Fevlabo, which is an inter-profession organization of organizing courses for both deaf and hearing people. As such, the interviewees had quite a diverse profile.

VAN HERREWEGHE ET AL.
extremely important for the Flemish Deaf community. At the same time, six of the interviewees had no idea of what was exactly stipulated in the Decree next to the symbolic recognition of VGT. One person maintained that it was about “the rights of Deaf people! Sign Language needs to be more widely spread, for instance by the media” (our translation). The person who claimed to read quite a lot about things related to the Deaf community stated: “Sign Language in education, interpreting, in public institutions, with the police, with the doctor, that you can use it there” (our translation). They all felt that the recognition was very important for the Deaf community, but that they could not see any real immediate impact and that for Flemish deaf people things were only slowly changing. Nevertheless, most interviewees did see some transformations with respect to more accessibility to mainstream society and more access to interpreting—especially the newly established service of remote interpreting was mentioned by three interviewees. On a personal level, however, the interviewees maintained that the recognition did not seem to have changed things all that much. Only one older female informant said: “I notice that especially within friendships things have changed. We talk about it, people know. So especially among friends, not outside” (our translation).

In general, it could be said that the recognition of VGT had a certain impact on deaf people in Flanders. This was not so much felt in terms of day-to-day activities or more practically oriented issues, but clearly had an empowerment effect, or as one interviewee formulated it: “Everything is now also, acc…, well, real access… There is a greater awareness, it has been written on paper. We have gained more power because of it. That’s about it” (our translation). At the same time, though, most interviewees were quite apprehensive about the future.

Back to the Future: From Recognition to Erasure?

Reagan (2010) was only partially right when he described the recognition of VGT as the strongest recognition to be found in the European Union at present. First, this was said before the passing of other relatively strong sign language recognition legislation (for example, Act CXXV of 2009 on Hungarian Sign Language and the use of Hungarian Sign Language and use 2011 Act on the Status of the Icelandic Language and Icelandic Sign Language). Second, perhaps the biggest weakness of the decree is that it falls short of creating any educational linguistic rights (De Meulder, 2012). Unfortunately, this is true for most sign language recognition legislation (De Meulder, in press), McKee (2011, p. 288), when talking about the shortcomings of the New Zealand Sign Language Act, commented that “it is easier for an undergraduate student to learn NZSL far interest as part of their bachelor’s degree than for the parents of a preschooler to access regular tuition in NZSL to enable communication with their child.” The same could be said for Flanders, where the rights of deaf children to acquire VGT from an early age, to be educated in VGT if they wanted to, and for their parents to be supported in learning VGT is almost nonexistent. Universal Neonatal Hearing Screening (UNHS) has beenstructurally implemented by the Flemish Government’s service “Kind en Gezin” (“Child and Family”) since 1998 (Hardonk et al., 2010; Matthijs et al., 2012); but in the annual report of the service about the activities of the UNHS program, VGT is not mentioned and deafness is solely presented as a medical problem that can and should be solved:

Children with an auditory disability miss sensory stimulation, which is a necessary precondition for the development of speech. Furthermore, this disability is a detrimental effect on the development of the personality as a whole including social emotions, interpersonal relationships and behavior patterns. Negative effects also appear in the process of raising children and in parent-child interaction in the absence of auditory stimuli. Research has shown that intensive rehabilitation, with auditory stimulation of the brainstem starting before the age of six months, elevates children to a significantly higher level of speech skills than when children are fitted with a hearing aid between the ages of seven and eighteen months. (Van Kerschaver & Sappenners, 2011, p. 4) (our translation)

Despite the recognition of VGT as a language, “language development” is equated with “spoken language development,” and the “process of language development” is claimed to be a much slower one in deaf children. One of the referral centers—and it is not an exception—and has the following text in its information leaflet (retrieved on August 5, 2014, from http://www.tovertele.be/ folders/pdf/brochure_kinderen_met_en Gehoordoorstoornis.pdf):

A hearing impairment has a substantial influence on language and speech development. Hearing and understanding language precede language use. For a hearing child language develops spontaneously. A hearing child does not get the chance to hear as well as possible and to additionally “see” the language (speech reading, lip reading). The process of language acquisition takes much longer for these children. The vocabulary is often more restricted, and function words such as “more, still, because, . . . ” are difficult. Grammatical structures are acquired later. Abstract concepts (“happy, pleasure, joy, . . . ”) and figures of speech (“so take the train, to roll up your sleeves, . . . ”) have to be explained and repeated more frequently. (our translation)

This shows that VGT is again in danger of becoming erased by certain referral centers (cf. Matthijs et al., 2012) since it is rendered invisible by them. Moreover, VLOK-Cl, the main parent organization of deaf children with a cochlear implant, wrote a vision statement on mainstreamed education of deaf children in which they claim (2011, p. 7):

Most of the deaf/hand-of-hearing children grow up with hearing parents. In a hearing family with a deaf child it is impossible to provide a full sign language. For many deaf children Sign language is not the language of the family and therefore never the first language. At the time of the diagnosis of “deafness” for most parents Sign language is still totally unknown. To be able to give your child a language immersion from birth is a prerequisite, i.e. it must be a language that you as a parent (and preferably the whole family) can use with your child (environment) completely mastered. If you offer a limited number of “signs” with much awkwardness, one cannot speak of the much-needed immersion. (our translation)

VLOK-Cl (2011, p. 7) further claims that since 95% of deaf children come from families who use Dutch at home and since they more frequently and at an earlier age mainstream into general education where Dutch is the language of instruction, Dutch is considered the language to be fostered. Today most deaf children from hearing parents who are mainstreamed from a young age onward never get the opportunity to develop a rich VGT in contact with deaf peers or adults (Debeerst, 2014).

The combined trend of cochlear implantation and mainstreaming leading to the possibility of a renewed usage of VGT clearly worries Flemish deaf parents. Four of the interviewees in the 2014 study spontaneously started talking about their concerns for the future. One older deaf man stated, “I am afraid for the members of [the Deaf club] if deaf children will all go to hearing schools. What will it be like later? I don’t think I will meet the chance to hear as well as possible and to additionally “see” the language (speech reading, lip reading). The process of language acquisition takes much longer for these children. The vocabulary is often more restricted, and function words such as “more, still, because,” are difficult. Grammatical structures are acquired later. Abstract concepts (“happy, pleasure, joy,”) and figures of speech (“so take the train, to roll up your sleeves,”) have to be explained and repeated more frequently. (our translation)

Concluding Remarks

In the past few decades VGT ideologies have gone through substantial developments from erasure to recognition both within the Deaf community and hearing mainstream society. Recognition of VGT clearly has empowered Flemish deaf people, but at the same time they do worry about the future. The main question to be raised in the next decade is that of how and whether deaf children of hearing parents in Flanders will be able to acquire VGT. As VGT is hardly used in the home situation, and the transition to mainstream education is encouraged, fewer and fewer deaf children attend schools for the deaf, traditionally the cradle of Deaf culture. Thus, the opportunities to develop a rich VGT and meet deaf people and obtain near-normal or even normal contact within Flemish education. At the same time, there has been a lot of openness toward VGT in mainstream society, even more so in the period leading up to and since its recognition by Flemish Parliament. The recognition has also had a very positive effect within the Deaf community with respect to the status of and attitudes toward VGT. Hence, Flanders seems to find itself in a schizophrenic situation: on the one hand, mainstream society, the Flemish government, and obviously also the Flemish Deaf community have recognized VGT as the first language of Flemish deaf signers, but on the other hand within the (para)medical world erasure of VGT, especially with respect to deaf children of hearing parents, is gaining ground, which is a serious concern in the Flemish Deaf community. The decree on the recognition of VGT has not been able to prevent this or reverse this situation. Both legal and nonlegal measures would be needed to ensure deaf children can acquire VGT from birth and be educated in VGT. The VGT community itself has a crucial role to play in this evolution and must be consulted on any issues that concern them.