



WFD POLICY

WFD Statement on the Unification of Sign Languages

Several questions have been raised on the increasing attempt 1) to replace old Sign Languages with a “better” sign language; 2) to unify several Sign Languages to a single sign language; or 3) to delete foreign signs from Sign Languages. For this reason, the WFD Board wishes to issue a public statement with assistance by its sign language and human rights experts*.

Like spoken languages, signed languages always experience the adoption of new signs from foreign Sign Languages. The adoption of new signs may occur whenever deaf people from different countries try to communicate with each other at international meetings or whenever deaf people watch Sign Languages on foreign TV screens. Any effort to force deaf people to borrow signs from foreign Sign Languages has always been fruitless or markedly modified as history has suggested.

From a historical view, virtually all languages, both spoken and signed, cannot remain unchanged. In fact, new signs appear in every generation. Like old signs, new signs may be fully accepted, may be modified eventually or may disappear. Even so-called classical languages have been forced to create new words or signs in response to new changes in technology or scientific research.

Sign Languages in the countries where their spoken languages are mutually understandable, however, are quite different. For example, while spoken English in Europe, Asia, the Pacific, South America, Central America and North America is more or less mutually understandable, Sign Languages, originally imported by foreign missionaries or teachers for the deaf, are not mutually understandable. The US-Canadian finger alphabet is different from the British finger alphabet which is dominating in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and a few other countries.

Comparisons of both spoken and signed languages have repeatedly confirmed that their developments are strongly influenced by cultural changes. In fact, the development of any language, signed or spoken, and the culture where the language is practiced always is mutually influenced. No culture can emerge without language and no language can emerge without culture. In short, language and culture are closely related. However, cultures have a powerful influence on the development of language, both spoken and signed. Several countries sharing the same language can have different cultures, i.e. industrialized versus developing. The vocabulary of any language, both spoken and signed, in every country always is influenced by social, industrial, technological and other changes, known as cultural changes. Signed languages in different countries

speaking a single language cannot be forced to become a single language. Like spoken words, several imported foreign signs have eventually been modified mostly in industrialized countries. For these reasons, any attempt to unify Sign Languages practiced in the countries sharing the same spoken or written language is fruitless.

As history has repeatedly confirmed, several countries have failed to prevent the import of foreign words into their native spoken languages or to replace imported foreign words with words adopted from their spoken languages. Such changes have also occurred to Sign Languages.

Accordingly, the WFD Board wants to state firmly that any forcible purification or unification of Sign Languages, conducted by governments, professionals working with Deaf people, and organizations for or of the Deaf, is a violation of the UN and UNESCO treaties, declarations and other policies, including the recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Deaf people in every country have the sole right to make changes, if necessary, in their own local, provincial and national Sign Languages in response to cultural changes. The control of the development of any Sign Language must be left to any social group where the particular Sign Language is exercised.

*List of Experts:

Yutaka Osugi

Kim Robinson

Tove Skuttnabb-Kangas

Yerker Andersson

THE WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF (WFD)

WFD is an international, non-governmental central organisation of national associations of Deaf people, with a current membership of 130 countries.

WFD has consultative status in the United Nations (UN) system, including the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the International Labor Organization (ILO); and the World Health Organization (WHO). WFD also co-operates closely with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has representatives on the Panel of Experts on the UN Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

World Federation of the Deaf
General Secretariat
PO Box 65
00401 Helsinki
FINLAND

Email: info@wfdeaf.org

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