



A European Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with
European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of Europe

International Sign Guidelines

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Sign languages are natural languages that have the same linguistic properties as spoken languages. They have evolved over years in the different Deaf Communities across the world and Europe. Despite widespread opinions there is not one single universal sign language in the world or even in Europe. Just as spoken languages, sign languages vary greatly between countries and ethnic groups. Some countries have more than one sign language or dialect. Countries that have the same spoken language do not necessarily have the same signed language (see for example Germany and Austria).

In recent years Deaf people have been travelling extensively, taking part in international events, which increased the need for a lingua franca, much like English is widely used today. Early accounts of Deaf people using an 'international communication mode' could be seen in 1924 at the International Games for the Deaf (now known as Deaflympics) in Paris. During the 1970's *Gestuno*, was created by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). They decided to adopt a number of signs in an attempt to create a sign system to facilitate communication at the WFD Congresses every four years. Although the list of signs did not become widely accepted, the concept of an international signing system continued developing.

Currently, International Sign (IS) is sometimes also referred to as an auxiliary language where meaning has to be negotiated between signers. IS Signers reportedly use a set of signs from their own national sign language mixed with highly iconic signs that can be understood by a large audience. Additionally, grammatical features that are thought to be common among (Western) sign languages are drawn upon. This can be classifiers, role-play, and general non-manual features, among others. It has therefore been said that IS is more of a language than a typical pidgin.

Today, IS is used widely at international meetings where participants do not share one common sign language. Although often heavily influenced by American Sign Language (ASL) internationally, experienced IS signers nowadays try to be as independent from one specific national sign language as possible to ensure a large audience of varied backgrounds can understand the message to the fullest extent possible.

Experience has shown that it is difficult to teach IS to anyone not knowing at least one or more national sign languages. Exposure to a number of sign languages and different signing styles is usually a better contributor to a signer's knowledge of IS than a specific IS 'language' course. EUD acknowledges that there is no standard for IS interpreters and there is no guarantee that an IS interpreter can interpret in every given setting or for every IS user. Furthermore, EUD strongly supports the notion that IS interpreters must first become professional sign language interpreters at national level, including appropriate English language competencies before entering the IS domain. EUD further encourages the facilitation of Deaf interpreters especially when interpreting between two or more sign languages.

Therefore, EUD supports the recognition of national sign languages in all EU Member States as well as the interpretation from and to national sign languages, along with the teaching of national sign languages. The EU language policy states that 'using the different languages spoken by its citizens is a major factor in ensuring greater transparency, legitimacy and effectiveness'. In line with this policy EUD actively supports access in one's indigenous language (i.e. a national sign language for all Deaf citizens). Providing interpretations in as many national sign languages as possible would be an ideal solution but due to financial and professional restrictions this is not always feasible. However, access in the national sign language (for an audience from one sign language community with a common sign language or a single Deaf person) should always be prioritised and is the only way to provide full and equal access. Therefore, IS is – albeit not being the perfect solution – a good option when working with a diverse audience.

Note:

This position paper has been developed in co-operation with the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsl).

References and Further Reading:

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Further Links:

World Federation of the Deaf

<http://www.wfdeaf.org>

European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters

<http://www.efsl.org>

World Association of Sign Language Interpreters

<http://www.wasli.org>

EU Language Policy

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en//FTU_4.17.3.pdf