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“Hands off our language!”
Deaf sign language teachers’ perspectives on sign language standardisation.

by

Hanna Eichmann

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

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Abstract

In light of the absence of codified standard varieties of British Sign Language (BSL) and German Sign Language (*Deutsche Gebärdensprache*, DGS), there have been repeated calls for the standardisation of both languages primarily from outside the deaf communities. The development of standard varieties has been suggested to facilitate political recognition and the establishment of linguistic norms which could enable sign language users to gain equal access to education, administration and commerce.

Although frequently labelled as sociolinguistic enquiry, much research in standardisation and language planning displays a certain preference for investigating the *linguistic* aspects of language. Explicit discussion of social-theoretical perspectives is scarce. In order to address this imbalance, this study focuses on the *social* aspect of the subject matter by investigating the concept of sign language standardisation from the perspective of deaf sign language teachers. Taking a comparative approach, research findings are based on 17 in-depth interviews conducted in Germany and the UK which were analysed drawing on Grounded Theory.

Participants in both countries conceptualised sign language standardisation predominantly as externally imposed language change pertaining to the eradication of regional dialects. Given that in contrast to hearing learners of sign languages, participants did not regard regional variation as a problem but as a highly valued feature of BSL and DGS, sign language standardisation was seen as a threat to sign languages. Moreover, the subject matter was also perceived as embodying hearing people's hegemony by bringing to the fore traditional power imbalances between deaf people and hearing stake holders in the political and educational realms.

This study is the first to explore and examine perceptions of and attitudes towards sign language standardisation in the UK and Germany. It thereby contributes to knowledge in respect to sign language sociolinguistics, as well as standardisation and language planning in the wider field. Moreover, taking an explicitly *socio*linguistic approach and in drawing on social research methodology, this study offers an atypical perspective on the issue of language standardisation in general.

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