

# **TITLE: Ableism and Linguicism in Governmental Documentation – the Case of Swedish Sign Language (STS)**

## **Plain English SUMMARY**

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### **Why have we studied this?**

The date 14 May 1981 or simply 'in 1981', is often referred to as the day when Swedish Sign Language was formally recognized by the Parliament. Swedish deaf organisations and the sign language communities refer to this date as a milestone for the rights of deaf people to their language and cultural identity.

Still today, though, not all deaf children are allowed to learn sign language and be educated in sign language. Furthermore, important public information in times of crises, like e.g. pandemics and international instability, are not consistently made available in sign language.

The aim of our research has been to find out how this contradiction has come to be and its implication for sign language rights, and for the deaf community.

### **How did we study this?**

Our study addresses language and linguistic acts from two perspectives. One of these focuses on deaf citizens' rights to information in sign language and the right to a bilingual education taught in Swedish Sign Language and Swedish. The other perspective is politicians use of language in official documents about deaf people and sign languages.

The studied texts are retrieved from public / open-for-all official governmental archives online or at libraries in Stockholm and Lund, Sweden.

We base our study on two main theoretical frameworks; critical discourse analysis (drawing on Fairclough) and theories of power and domination through negotiation (as described by Gramsci). In a critical discourse analysis, the role of language is studied and how it is used to describe society, its members and e.g. social issues that need to be changed or improved. Language and communication are here viewed as social acts, formed by and forming the social environment – and social acts are considered in part linguistic acts, formed by and forming how we communicate through language.

We also discuss our findings in terms of ableism, based on audism, and linguicism. All three indicate discrimination on the grounds of functionality, and the assumed privilege of spoken languages over signed, observed within a social structure.

### **Findings**

Our maybe most central result of the study, was what we did *not* find:

The word sign language (in Swedish 'teckenspråk') turned out to be not even mentioned in the formal Parliamentary protocol of 14 May 1981.

There are, however, other documents mentioned in the protocol, and some decisions being

made in the Chamber of Parliament that day, in parts concerning deaf student's education and the questions of keeping special schools or to integrate deaf students in the public school system.

Within the documents, including debates and legal propositions over the years following 1981, we have observed patterns, that might shed light over references to 14 May 1981. The reference is often used as confirmation that sign language 'already' is protected. From governmental perspective it has been used as an argument against proposed interventions or changes in legislation.

The mentioning of the date is seldom accompanied with a specific reference to its original wording. We find a recurring pattern of implied 'common sense' in the argumentation. We consider a possible ambition of the Government/Parliament at the time, not to be granting legal linguistic rights. Instead, we see 'strongly suggested' or good-will statements of solidarity, an intention of integration and acceptance of those considered 'different'; suggestions of adjustments or special adaptations to overcome difficulties with the (spoken) surrounding language.

A sign language based deaf culture is seldom mentioned in the documents, and if it is, the matter considered is more about how deaf people can access Swedish hearing culture.

We find the terminology used and logic of reason within the documents as possible grounds for misunderstandings or maybe confusion of what sign language *is* and what access to sign language means to deaf people.

The texts mention sign language as:

- a sort of minority language
- a 'mother tongue'
- a 'first language'
- a necessity to be combined with the 'surrounding language' (Swedish)
- an accommodation for those who can't hear or speak, to be able to communicate (with the surrounding society)
- a non-verbal version of spoken Swedish

There are often contradicting definitions within the same text.

### **Some implications**

Imprecise, contradictive, or shifting / gliding definitions and legislation that do not specify legal consequences when not followed, pose a risk that seemingly granted rights are denied in practice by claiming that documents contain 'suggestions' or 'ambitions' rather than unequivocal rights.

To regularly refer to a document or a statement made a long time ago without concrete reference to it, may over time become a 'commonly shared truth', not in need of confirmation. This truth can be used from several perspectives with diverse aims.

The practice of commonly shared truths has been described as a tool of power positions and divisions upheld through negotiation, avoiding responsibility to follow through and implement something 'vaguely promised'.

We here note implications also for sign language linguistics / the deaf community. When repeatedly acknowledging and appreciating statements of recognition as being official, while lacking in concrete legally binding obligations, the chance of achieving a concrete and binding legal right to e.g. sign language in schooling of all deaf children, diminish. 'Sign language is already recognised, in 1981', can be, and has repeatedly been, a non-committal response.

### **More information**

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Following Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, the authors of this article acknowledge their active role and motivations as researchers. All of them are [hearing] researchers within the broader field of disability studies, with some expertise also in overlapping disciplines like Deaf Studies and Critical Disability Studies. Collectively, they contribute with diverse experiences of disability, a commitment to Participatory Action Research practices, and knowledge of sign linguistics and Swedish Sign Language. This article is a product of a joint effort, arising from the first author's PhD project, financed by Begripsam AB, Stockholm, Sweden.

Disclaimer: In this summary we use words like deaf, both as an identity and/or as a form of impairment, and sign language both as a linguistic and/or a disability policy matter. We, consciously, do not use e.g. 'Capital D Deaf' or 'STS', due to cultural and linguistic differences between scientific / national / international contexts. This is not to make a statement of what is or is not correct language, but merely to avoid more lengthy text in a summary. In the article we explain our choices of wording in more detail.