



Co-funded by
the European Union

DK
Dobre Kadry
Centrum badawczo-szkoleniowe Sp. z o.o.

Aarnaka
2030
EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE
CANDIDATE CITY

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΝΟΗΜΑΤΙΚΗΣ ΓΛΩΣΣΑΣ
Τέχνης Επικοινωνίας



AKADEMIA SZTUK PIĘKNYCH
IM. EUGENIUSZA GEPPERTA
WE WROCŁAWIU

Count me In (Increasing the participation of deaf people in the perception of culture)
Project Number – 101173224



REPORT:

The influence of culture on sign language

Count
me In



Creative Europe
Program 2024



**FROM ANTIQUITY
TO PRESENT,
SIGN LANGUAGES
ARE VEHICLES
OF CULTURE**

Table of content



1.	Introduction	4
2.	Research results in a group of Deaf people	6
3.	Research results in a group of people professionally dealing with sign language and Deaf culture	15
4.	Desk research results	25
5.	A snapshot of selected countries	33
6.	Main cultural elements that influence sign language	50
7.	Other Key Factors Influencing Sign Language	56
8.	Key conclusions and recommendations	71



Introduction

Sign language serves not only as a tool of communication for Deaf individuals but also as a carrier of their cultural identity. As a visual-spatial language, it develops in a unique way – not only through natural intergenerational transmission but also under the influence of dynamic socio-cultural processes. **The aim of this report is to investigate how broadly understood culture – encompassing media, art, traditions, and lifestyle – affects the development of sign languages.** The report is based on qualitative research conducted as part of a project *Count me In* financed by the Creative Europe Program. The main goal of the project is to increase the participation of Deaf people in the perception of culture by better adapting cultural events to their specific needs. We aim to achieve this goal by

developing modern educational materials that highlight the specific needs and expectations of Deaf individuals for cultural event organizers. We firmly believe that by promoting knowledge about sign language users and providing practical skills for adapting cultural event organization to the characteristics of this target group, we can significantly improve accessibility. As a result, entry barriers for Deaf people will be reduced, leading to greater participation in various forms of cultural life. In the project, we conducted primary research with a group of Deaf people (focus groups) and a group of experts dealing with sign language and Deaf culture (individual in-depth interviews). As part of the secondary research, we reviewed the specifics of sign language in selected countries. The research was conducted between January and April 2025. The study had two main objectives. The first was to explore the influence of broadly understood culture on sign language, and the report we present is a summary of the results in this area. The second was to identify good practices that could help increase the participation of Deaf people in mainstream culture. The results in this area will be used to prepare educational materials for organizers of cultural events.

The partnership consists of four entities from three European Union countries: Poland, Cyprus and Greece: Dobrze Kadry. Research Training and Centre (Poland), The Hellenic Institute of Sign Language “Communication Bridges”

(Greece), The Organization for the European Capital of Culture Larnaka 2030 (Cyprus) and The Eugeniusz Geppert Wrocław Academy of Art and Design (Poland).





Research results in a group of Deaf people

The study was conducted using focus group interview (FGI), duration: average of 2-2.15 h. In total, five focus groups were conducted: two in Poland and Greece, and one in Cyprus. The target group was Deaf people using sign language. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their statements would be used solely for project and analytical purposes. The majority of the groups were women, in the case of Poland, exclusively women. The reduced male participation in the discussion is a result of their lower participation in survey-type activities and weaker access to this part of the community through available channels. The interviews conducted in Greece, Poland, and Cyprus offer deep insights into the dynamic relationship between culture and

sign languages. Culture is not just a backdrop for sign communication — it is an active force that shapes development, forms, meanings, and societal roles within sign languages. Whether through participation in mainstream cultural events or creative expression within Deaf communities, culture serves as a crucible in which sign languages are used, transformed, enriched, and passed on across generations.

Below are the key findings from our analysis, each rooted in national contexts yet reflecting shared patterns across these three countries, illustrating the multifaceted ways culture influences sign languages:

1. Culture as a catalyst for Sign Language development

Across Greece, Poland, and Cyprus, participants emphasized the importance of cultural engagement in advancing sign languages. Contact with theatrical performances, concerts, and festivals contributes to expanding vocabulary, developing idioms, and creatively adapting language to suit artistic expression. Interpreted events in sign languages provide spaces for reflecting on meaning and translating cultural content into visual-spatial linguistic forms.

In Poland, Deaf-led performances in schools and community centers serve not only as entertainment but as language practice that strengthens identity and linguistic growth. In Greece and

Cyprus, thematic theater productions — particularly those portraying Deaf experiences — foster the creation of unique contextual signs and narrative techniques.

2. Deaf-led cultural events as sites of linguistic creativity

Events organized within Deaf communities — such as sign-language festivals, artistic performances, and educational workshops — function as incubators of cultural identity and linguistic innovation. In Greece, organizations like Atlas E.P., with their pioneering accessibility efforts, actively involve Deaf individuals in creative processes. In Cyprus, local Deaf clubs and schools have historically provided cultural hubs. Such grassroots initiatives are vital for intergenerational language transmission and maintaining shared linguistic norms.

3. Mass culture barriers hamper language practice

In all three countries, systemic barriers in mainstream cultural spaces — such as lack of interpreters, unreadable captioning, poor lighting, and flawed event logistics — restrict Deaf participation and limit opportunities to engage with sign language in broader social contexts.

Participants from Cyprus and Greece highlighted how interpreter competence, visibility,

and rapport with users influence meaningful access. In Poland, absence of information in Polish Sign Language (PJM) during promotions discourages attendance and weakens linguistic exchange within cultural dialogue.

4. Interpreters and technology as shapers of linguistic practices

Sign language interpreters do more than relay messages — they carry culture and shape how cultural content is presented linguistically. In Greece and Cyprus, respondents noted that interpretation for theater or concerts must be handled by qualified professionals, ideally in partnership with Deaf individuals, to capture rhythm, emotional nuance, and meaning. Technological tools — such as QR codes linking to sign-language videos, captioning apps, speech to text live captioning, and augmented reality features — offer new linguistic pathways. However, their success depends on Deaf community involvement in design. Polish and Greek respondents stressed the importance of co-creating digital accessibility solutions with Deaf language experts.

5. International contact enhances flexibility and language evolution

In Greece and Cyprus, engagement through travel, festivals, and collaborative initiatives

with Deaf communities abroad has significantly influenced local sign languages. International interactions introduce International Sign and new structural elements, enriching local variants. Such exposure not only boosts linguistic competence but also fosters connection to a global Deaf identity. Respondents reflected on how cross-border gatherings stimulate discussions about linguistic norms, aesthetics, and cultural-linguistic differences within sign languages.

6. Culture as a space for creativity, resistance, and inclusion

Overall, participants described sign language as both reflecting and co-creating Deaf culture — a space for meaning-making, storytelling, and resistance against marginalization. Culture offers a platform for self-expression and negotiation of social standing. In all three countries, respondents emphasized that the goal extends beyond mere “accessibility” to full inclusion — equal participation in the creation, reception, and interpretation of cultural content. This deeper commitment fosters sign languages as living, diverse, and socially embedded communication systems.

This synthesis highlights how, across Greece, Poland, and Cyprus, cultural engagement actively molds sign-language development, fosters creativity, bridges communities, and promotes full inclusion. The study underlines that true linguistic

vitality arises not just from visibility, but from cultural recognition and the empowerment of Deaf people as creators and interpreters in their own right.

Summary Poland

Deaf people enjoy trips/travel and cultural events if they have the opportunity and motivation to do so. However, they are cautious in doing so and prefer situations where they can communicate and remain themselves without involving special means, that is, accessible to the Deaf or easy to comprehend. An effective motivation is the presence of Deaf broadcasters, especially from other countries.

Communication accessibility and a sense of security at cultural events is usually a necessary but not sufficient condition for Deaf people. As part of communicative accessibility, they expect, at the very least, the preparation of information understandable to them before the event. Preferably when these are in sign language, supported by simple written and graphic information. Communication channels are less important, it is important that the information reach Deaf circles, preferably with the ultimate goal of creating venues that act as information hubs for cultural events. For many Deaf people this is not enough, they require accessibility for them



also during the event, preferably the presence of a PJM sign interpreter or a PJM sign language tutor/guide from the organizer, the possibility to use wifi, translation apps. In terms of ensuring safety, they expect Deaf-specific considerations when moving around, clear instructions, signage, light alarms, adequately bright rooms, staff training. They prefer going out or going in a group, when they can rely on others in case of need, and just talk without being hindered. However, they don't necessarily want to reveal that they are Deaf or have a special attendant at the entrance.

The preference for events for the Deaf or with Deaf broadcasters is quite obvious - these types

of events usually guarantee a good level of communication accessibility for the Deaf. Its symbol is sign translation into PJM. General events are rarely accessible to the Deaf, and if so, the means used are not always convenient for the Deaf. Moreover, because of the presumption of inaccessibility, they usually have to signal it clearly for the Deaf to notice it. Accessibility for the Deaf created by the hearing or hard of hearing without consulting the Deaf does not always create good conditions for the Deaf. For example, issues such as poor Polish, ability to speak, specifics of people with implants are not taken into account. Inconveniently placed places with interpretation, make it difficult to understand.

There are quite a few good practices and examples of well-prepared events. Both for the Deaf (festivals e.g. in Reims- <https://www.clin-doeil.eu/en/>) as well as publicly accessible (SLOT-Lubiąż - PL, Pol'and'Rock Festival). There is also a certain openness of cultural institutions to Deaf consultation and the introduction of communication facilities. In general, however, the Deaf are rather absent from the general culture, which they themselves note, pointing out that hearing people miss the opportunity to learn about Deaf culture and get acquainted with them.



Summary Greece

In Greece, the Deaf community is experiencing significant growth in accessibility and participation in cultural events. In recent years, there has been increased awareness of accessibility, and several private companies now provide adequate facilities for the Deaf. This change has been driven by legislation and strong advocacy efforts from the Deaf community. However, some barriers and challenges still exist. Some of the most significant ones include:

- > Limited sign language interpretation in many events, often without proper technical specifications, resulting in poor accessibility.

Issues such as inadequate interpreter placement, poor lighting, or an unsuitable background hinder full participation for the Deaf.

- > Event information is frequently published in written Greek, not easy to read, without visual support or sign language videos, making accessibility limited once again. If Deaf are not informed about an event, they cannot participate, meaning an event might offer Greek Sign Language (GSL) interpretation but still have no Deaf attendees.
- > Since private companies mainly provide accessibility, government support is lacking, leaving no incentive for growth. Moreover, private associations prioritize profit over genuine accessibility, resulting in the presence of interpreters but an absence of Deaf participants.
- > Events become more engaging when Deaf interpreters, presenters, and actors take part. This not only promotes awareness in the Deaf community, but also guarantees clear and sign language interpretation by native signers.
- > No signal, important visual information — like alerts or emergency updates — not available, making it harder to stay informed during critical situations.

Making Accessibility Info More Available for the Deaf Community

Not everyone in the Deaf community is equally informed about accessibility efforts by cultural organizations. While some people know their options, many have little to no information, which creates a gap in participation. To make sure accessibility reaches everyone, it's important to improve how these initiatives are communicated — whether through clearer messaging, more sign language resources, or better outreach. Finding effective ways to share this information can make a huge difference in cultural inclusion.

Recommendations for Further Progress

- > Accessibility Guide for event organizers to ensure standardized regulations and requirements. This should include Deaf consultants with relevant experience.
- > Training seminars for staff members of cultural institutions.
- > Community workshops to inform Deaf individuals about accessibility opportunities and promote digital literacy, especially for elderly Deaf people.
- > Event programming tailored to Deaf needs, such as a Deaf Festival.

Technical and interpretation standards for Sign Language:

- > High-resolution cameras for broadcasting sign language content in TV shows, online platforms, and events.

Quality lighting to ensure clear hand gestures and facial expressions.

- Screens and projectors to display interpreters clearly in large venues.
- Video conferencing software such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, which support sign language interpretation.
- Specialized microphones for capturing the interpreter's voice translation.
- Certified interpreters trained and accredited by professional Sign Language Associations.
- Neutral, monochrome backgrounds for enhanced sign language clarity.
- International Sign Language standards for better cross-border communication.
- Reserved seating for Deaf attendees to ensure unobstructed interpreter viewing.
- Full accessibility from entry to exit, including ticketing, reception, and seating arrangements.

Summary Cyprus

A recent focus group composed of six Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals from shed light on the challenges and opportunities surrounding accessibility in cultural events. The participants, who are active members of the Deaf community and have experience in various cultural, educational, and advocacy roles, shared their perspectives on what meaningful participation in cultural life looks



like for Deaf people. Their insights underscore the critical distinction between simple access and genuine inclusion.

Central to the discussion was the unanimous agreement that the presence of sign language interpreters and subtitles is essential for Deaf people to engage with cultural content. Live interpretation is preferred, though remote or pre-recorded sign language videos can also be effective when appropriately integrated. Subtitles complement interpretation, especially for those with limited sign language proficiency or literacy. However, participants noted that these accessibility measures are still inconsistently provided, and when they are offered, they are

often poorly executed — such as interpreters being obscured by poor lighting or not being visible from all seating areas.

Participants expressed a strong preference for attending events that reflect their identity, such as performances by Deaf artists or events organized by the Deaf community. Nevertheless, when cultural events are made accessible and relevant — such as those addressing disability, equality, or personal narratives — Deaf individuals are eager to participate. This highlights the importance of both content and accessibility in fostering engagement.

Another recurring theme was the inadequacy of communication about accessible events. Deaf individuals often mistrust generic text-based promotions, particularly when they lack clear details about the type of interpretation or accessibility features provided. Participants emphasized the importance of sign language video announcements shared through multiple platforms, and they encouraged organizers to collaborate with Deaf associations to ensure clear and inclusive communication.

Travel for cultural purposes was another area of shared experience among the participants. Several had travelled to international festivals, workshops, or cultural exchanges that were either led by or inclusive of Deaf people. These events,

especially those organized by Deaf communities, were described as empowering and enjoyable, offering a rare sense of full belonging. For example, one participant recalled a sailing trip in the Netherlands led by a Deaf captain, while others highlighted theatre festivals in France and cross-European cultural programs. Encounters with Deaf individuals from other countries often facilitated deeper cultural exchange through International Sign Language, reinforcing the importance of Deaf-led and Deaf-aware planning in international contexts.

The group also discussed broader issues of inclusion. They stressed that accessibility alone does not equate to inclusion. Inclusion means involving Deaf people from the earliest planning stages, creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between Deaf and hearing participants, and recognizing the diverse needs within the Deaf community. The lack of systemic support — such as real-time interpreting services or trained Deaf guides in museums — was also noted, particularly in Cyprus, where such infrastructure is still developing.

In terms of recommendations, participants urged event organizers to consult Deaf communities directly, provide both interpretation and subtitles, ensure appropriate physical arrangements (e.g., front-row seating), and utilize technologies like QR codes linking to sign language videos.



They also suggested that cultural organizers adopt a mindset of co-creation with the Deaf community, rather than retrofitting accessibility measures after events are planned.

Ultimately, the focus group concluded that Deaf individuals are eager and willing to participate in cultural life — but only when their linguistic and

cultural identities are respected and supported. True inclusion, they emphasized, is achieved not merely through technical fixes, but through intentional, respectful collaboration.





Research results in a group of people professionally dealing with sign language and Deaf culture

Research results in a group of people professionally dealing with sign language and Deaf culture. The study was conducted using in-depth individual interviews (IDIs). This method was chosen for its ability to explore the subjective experiences, views, and perceptions of social phenomena by participants – in this case, people those directly involved in working with the Deaf community (sign language interpreters, cultural event facilitators for the Deaf, educators specializing in surdopedagogy, CODA). Fifteen individuals took part in the study, each representing different perspectives related to sign language, cultural participation, and experience in organising and attending events. All respondents were familiar with Deaf culture and had practical experience in communicating in sign languages. Participants

came from various regions of Poland, Greece and Cyprus allowing for the inclusion of geographical and environmental diversity. The collected data was subjected to thematic analysis, involving the identification of key themes and recurring categories in participant statements. The analysis was inductive – categories were derived without imposing prior assumptions, respecting the authenticity of the respondents' voices. This process led to the identification of major areas in which culture influences sign language, as well as factors that support or limit its development. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their statements would be used solely for project and analytical purposes.

The influence of broadly understood culture on Sign Language

The respondents offered a varied but generally consistent view on how culture influences sign languages. They emphasize that deaf communities prioritize meeting basic communication needs over incorporating elements of high culture such as art or theatre into their language. The respondents unanimously indicated that the most significant factor influencing the development of sign language is digital media, especially the Internet and social media. Platforms such as blogs, Facebook, or Deaf-oriented portals

serve as spaces for exchanging information and signs, leading to the dynamic development of the language, including borrowings from other sign languages (e.g. IS – International Sign, ASL – American Sign Language). High culture, such as theatre or literature, has a marginal impact and is often perceived as inaccessible due to linguistic complexity and a lack of adaptation to the needs of Deaf audiences. In contrast, popular culture – for example, comics, films, and blogs – may have an impact through the necessity of creating new signs (e.g. for proper names), although the extent of this influence is assessed differently. Elements of national culture, such as anthems or patriotic songs, are sometimes represented in signing, though this is often initiated by Deaf organisations rather than state institutions.

Generational differences, regionalisms, and the development of specialist vocabulary are observable in sign language. Differences in emotional expression stem from distinct cultural patterns as well as from a sense of belonging to Deaf culture. Cultural diversity within the country, both regional and ethnic, leads to the emergence of local sign variants that reflect the identity and customs of specific groups. Examples include different signs for traditional drinks across various parts of Greece and influences from Romani culture. Globalization, new technologies, and intensified international contact contribute to



the borrowing and simplification of signs, as well as the creation of new signs for modern concepts. Culture also significantly shapes how emotions are communicated in sign language. Greek expressiveness clearly manifests in sign language through facial expressions and the intensity of gestures. Cultural differences define what is considered politeness or anger, and these perceptions are directly reflected in non-verbal communication.

Respondents agreed that current educational materials on sign language often overlook the cultural context, focusing instead on linguistic structure. They emphasized the need for content based on real-life examples, featuring native signers, and for close collaboration with Deaf educators and cultural organizations to ensure authenticity and completeness. Good practices are emerging within informal education and selected cultural institutions.

Material and intangible culture in relation to Sign Language

Experts unanimously emphasized that both material culture and broader social and technological changes have a clear influence on sign language. Traditional clothing, architecture, tools, and pottery are reflected in signs that mimic their appearance or method of use. These signs not only document material cultural heritage but also reinforce the cultural identity of sign language users. The respondents emphasized that elements of material culture reflected in sign language are primarily related to architecture – distinctive buildings and their features are often represented through specific signs. In contrast, traditional clothing and tools play a marginal or no role in the creation of signs. More significant are lifestyle changes and technological development, which have led to a dynamic increase in

signs related to new devices, applications, and forms of communication. The most substantial influence on the development of sign language in the intangible sphere comes from the Internet and social media, which serve as the main source of sign, knowledge, and information exchange among Deaf individuals. Technologies such as speech-to-text apps, sign language learning tools, and mini induction loops support everyday communication, although their effectiveness depends on the user's proficiency in written spoken language.

Technology plays a central role in the development of sign language. With the emergence of new devices and applications — such as smartphones, social media, and video conferencing platforms — the Deaf community creates new signs to meet contemporary communication needs. Technological advances, lifestyle changes, and the pandemic have all accelerated the creation of new gestures and terminology, making sign language a dynamic and continuously evolving mode of communication. Media — especially social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube — have become the primary source of influence on sign language. Previously, television served a similar role. These modern media channels allow the Deaf community to share content, promote sign language, and strengthen internal bonds. Technologies that support communication — including video platforms, live

captioning, and translation apps — are crucial for the integration of Deaf individuals. However, access to these tools varies across countries. In more developed regions such as the EU or the U.S., such technologies are widespread, while in less developed areas, access may be limited or inconsistent.



Government policy plays a critical role in the development of sign language — through legislation, institutional support, access to education, and public services. Greece has officially recognized Greek Sign Language, and this has translated into stronger educational programs and greater cultural inclusion. In Poland state policies were assessed very critically – despite existing legal regulations, these are often not implemented in practice, leading to general dissatisfaction. According to respondents, unlike other countries where deaf communities fight for rights, Cypriot deaf advocacy is weakened by internal disputes. Traditions and beliefs also influence the creation of new signs. Many are derived from mythology, religion, or holiday customs. Signs may be adapted depending on cultural context — for example, some are modified to avoid being offensive during public broadcasts. Communities with differing values and beliefs also show variation in sign use or form — particularly regarding religion, sexual orientation, or social customs.

Participation of Deaf people in Deaf-led cultural events

Deaf individuals are more inclined to participate in Deaf-led cultural events than in mainstream ones, primarily because they feel understood and “at home” in those spaces. The presence of

sign language as a native language, a narrative style adapted to visual needs, and a strong sense of community are key factors. Events created by and for the Deaf attract significantly more interest than mainstream events that merely include sign language interpreters. Among the most distinctive features of Deaf culture highlighted by respondents were: the visual-spatial nature of the language, rich facial expressions, natural modes of communication, and a communal structure of the community (referred to as “clan-like”). Deaf culture operates on a different emotional expression and social norms compared to hearing culture, which often makes it less accessible to outsiders. Trust is a key element, as many Deaf people are cautious and suspicious towards the hearing communities due to historical marginalization and limited access to information. Past experiences of exclusion and the lack of accessibility in mainstream settings make Deaf-led events a place of safety, authenticity, and community. Participation in these events fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens pride in Deaf identity.

In contrast to mass culture, which relies heavily on sound and verbal communication, Deaf culture is based on visual and bodily communication. Mainstream culture often remains inaccessible due to language barriers and the lack of properly prepared events, whereas Deaf culture creates an environment in which participants do not need

additional communication support — sign language is central to the experience. Participation in Deaf culture plays a vital role in shaping Deaf identity. It enhances pride, positive self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. For many who lacked opportunities to develop a strong identity due to marginalization, Deaf culture offers new perspectives and a sense of acceptance. Moreover, involvement in these cultural events contributes to the preservation and development of the Deaf community's cultural heritage. Events of particular importance to the Deaf community include both formal initiatives (e.g. exhibitions curated by Deaf individuals, International Week of the Deaf) and informal gatherings (e.g. barbecues, trips, sporting events). The Deaflympics was especially emphasized as a space that strengthens visibility and unity within the community.

Participation of Deaf people in mainstream culture

The participation of Deaf individuals in mainstream cultural events is sporadic and selective, with only a few events gaining notable significance — and even then, these are rare and irregular. Deaf audiences are most likely to attend visual events that involve a lot of movement and can be adapted to their needs (e.g. concerts with sign language interpreters, performances with subtitles, events that are family-friendly). The lack of accessible communication (such

as a sign language interpreter or clear information) and inadequate promotion of events are the main barriers to participation. Support measures are largely symbolic — although legal provisions exist, accessibility in practice is limited, and cultural institutions' efforts are often inconsistent. The most popular forms of cultural participation among the Deaf community include theater performances, artistic competitions, sign language festivals, and social or religious gatherings. A common feature of these events is their accessibility and the ability to communicate in sign language, which allows Deaf people to express themselves fully and feel truly part of the experience.

A crucial factor is the attitude of cultural institution staff — their engagement, knowledge, and willingness to communicate with Deaf individuals. Respondents noted a lack of cultural awareness and education on both sides: among Deaf people (on how to use available tools) and among cultural workers. In terms of sign language interpreters, expectations are high — they concern both linguistic skills and cultural identity. Deaf individuals prefer interpreters from within their community (e.g. CODA or Deaf interpreters), who are more attuned to the audience's emotions, context, and needs. Important considerations also include the interpreter's dress code and their prior subject preparation. With regard to events dedicated to the Deaf community, respondents pointed



out the lack of systemic initiatives – when such events do occur, they are typically integrative and fail to address the specific needs of Deaf participants. The key channel of promotion is peer recommendation – trusted word-of-mouth can significantly increase attendance. Although there are some positive changes toward cultural



inclusivity, they are slow and often limited to larger cities. What is needed are not only formal actions but also a change in mindset and communication strategies – openness, dialogue, and recognition of Deaf people as a legitimate and equal audience for culture.

Causes of low participation of Deaf people in mainstream culture

Experts identified multiple reasons why Deaf individuals often do not participate in mainstream cultural events. The primary issue is the lack of a systematic approach to accessibility both in practical terms (such as the absence of sign language interpreters, subtitles, or assistive technologies) and in conceptual understanding (such as event organizers' lack of awareness about Deaf culture and its specific needs). Deaf individuals are rarely consulted during event planning, and information about accessibility is often inconsistent or shared too late. As a result, many events are only partially or entirely inaccessible to the Deaf community. The expectations of the Deaf community include the presence of qualified sign language interpreters (including Deaf interpreters), spatial arrangements that support visual communication, early and clear information on accessibility, and the integration of modern technologies (such as captioning apps, live interpretation, or QR codes linked to accessible content). However, interpreters are often inconsistently available, not always trained for artistic or cultural contexts, and sometimes positioned inappropriately, limiting the effectiveness of their interpretation.

There is also a lack of education and preparedness among event organizers, which results in

common mistakes — poor interpreter placement, inadequate communication about accessibility, or failure to use available resources effectively. Experts stress the need to train organizing teams in Deaf culture, sign language, and inclusive practices. Consulting directly with Deaf individuals and involving them in the planning process is considered essential to ensure authentic accessibility and avoid exclusionary errors. The absence of sign language interpretation leads not only to a lack of understanding of the event but also to emotional consequences such as frustration, loneliness, and social isolation. Organizers often fail to recognize that inaccessibility sends a powerful symbolic message of exclusion.

Preparing mass events with Deaf participation in mind

Respondents indicated that the key to increasing Deaf participation in mainstream events lies in accessibility technologies, dedicated communication methods, and informed actions by organizers based on knowledge of Deaf culture. The most promising tools include: mobile apps with translation functions, virtual reality, video recordings with sign language interpreters accessible via QR codes, and large screens with live sign language interpretation. Promotional materials should include: clear information on accessibility (interpreter, subtitles, seating with good visibility),



contact details for the accessibility coordinator, and details about the specific interpreter – ideally someone recognised and trusted within the Deaf community. Visual appeal and plain language are also essential. Preferred forms of pre-event communication include: social media, sign language video messages, a website section dedicated to Deaf users, and promotional clips in sign language – preferably presented

by someone directly involved in the event. Deaf individuals prefer interpreters to be centrally positioned on stage, well-lit, and clearly visible – either in person or projected on a large screen. Respondents noted that live interpretation is the best practice, yet organisers often make mistakes such as hiring too few interpreters, failing to account for changes in artist line-ups, or neglecting key technical aspects (lighting, backdrop, interpreter positioning).

Preferences regarding interpreter positioning vary by event type and venue size, but the key requirement is clear visibility. Options include on-stage placement next to performers, dedicated projection screens, or specific spots in the audience. Organizers should be flexible and responsive to individual preferences. Best practices for providing sign language interpretation include early planning in collaboration with Deaf individuals or organizations, hiring qualified interpreters (especially Deaf-hearing teams), reserving visually accessible seating, using multiple interpreters for longer events, conducting technical rehearsals, and employing hybrid (live + remote) formats. Promotion should explicitly include accessibility details. Common challenges include a shortage of culturally competent interpreters, limited budgets, last-minute planning, technical limitations (e.g., poor lighting or camera angles), and lack of awareness. These issues can be mitigated

by budgeting for accessibility from the outset, training staff in Deaf culture and communication, and using tech tools like low-latency streaming and interpreter backups.

Final remarks

Experts emphasized that the key to effectively implementing accessibility solutions among cultural event organizers is to build authentic partnerships with Deaf individuals. They noted that it is essential to rely on professionals who are deeply familiar with and respectful of Deaf culture and to ensure the active participation of Deaf people in all stages of the process. As areas for further exploration, the following topics were proposed: strengthening collaboration between Deaf and hearing communities as co-creators of culture, understanding the impact of cultural events on young Deaf people, developing unified standards for sign language interpretation, and addressing accessibility in hybrid or virtual cultural events.





Desk research results

1. History and Development of Sign Language

Across the countries analyzed, the development of sign language has deep historical roots often beginning with the establishment of formal Deaf education. In Austria, the founding of a Deaf school in 1779 marked one of the earliest institutional recognitions of Deaf people's communication needs. This trend continued across Europe and North America, with major institutions being established in Denmark (1807), Poland (1817), and the United States (1817), reflecting the growing awareness of the Deaf as a cultural and linguistic minority. These schools were often inspired by the teachings of Abbé de l'Épée, who advocated for manual communication through

Sign Language. Despite this progressive start, the Milan Congress of 1880 resembled a turning point where oralism became dominant in a variety of nations, leading to the systematic suppression of sign languages in educational settings.

Nevertheless, the resilience of Deaf communities helped preserve and nurture their languages. In many cases, sign languages evolved organically, incorporating local culture and gestures, even when banned from formal use. Official recognition arrived much later: for instance, Greek Sign Language (GSL) was recognized in 2000, German Sign Language (DGS) was recognized in 2002, Polish Sign Language (PJM) in 2011, and British Sign Language (BSL) gained full legislative recognition only in 2022. These milestones were often the result of prolonged advocacy by the Deaf community, who emphasized the cultural and communicative importance of sign languages.

The development of sign languages was also shaped by socio-political influences. For example, regional variations emerged in countries like Belgium and Poland due to partitioning and linguistic diversity. In the U.S., American Sign Language (ASL) developed as a rich and dynamic language formed through the blending of French Sign Language (LSF) and various local sign systems used across the United States.

Its evolution was deeply influenced by diverse communities, including Black Deaf Americans, whose distinct linguistic contributions shaped what is now known as Black ASL, as well as Native American sign traditions, which added cultural and communicative depth.

Thus, the historical development of sign language is a testament to the adaptive strength of the Deaf community, rooted in both resistance and innovation.

In addition to institutional history, many countries experienced unique sociopolitical dynamics that impacted the trajectory of sign language. For example, Belgium's linguistic division between Flemish and French-speaking regions has resulted in the coexistence of two distinct sign languages (VGT and LSFB), each with regional dialects and cultural traits. In Great Britain, BSL's evolution was influenced by geographic and educational segregation, and was for decades informally passed on within the Deaf community.

The United States illustrates how Deaf political activism shapes language recognition. The “Deaf President Now” movement of 1988 at Gallaudet University was a defining moment for ASL recognition, uniting the community around linguistic and cultural rights. Similarly, in Lithuania and Cyprus, recognition came only after years of advocacy, particularly from grassroots



organizations. These examples show how the trajectory of sign language development is not only academic or educational, but also deeply political.

What emerges is that sign languages are the product of both resistance to marginalization and resilience in building community. Recognition is not merely a legislative milestone - it often signals a shift in societal attitudes and a validation of Deaf identity and culture.

2. Influence of National Culture on Sign Language



Sign languages are deeply reflective of the national cultures in which they develop. They absorb and mirror the values, traditions, customs, and social norms of their surrounding societies. For instance, in Cyprus, the sign for “Easter” visually represents the egg-tapping tradition, an vivid example of how national customs are integrated into CSL. Greek Sign Language (GSL) incorporates maritime terms due to Greece’s close relationship with the sea, which is an integral part of its life and culture. This connection is reflected in the rich vocabulary surrounding maritime concepts, such as ‘sea’ and ‘wave.’ In contrast, sign languages from landlocked countries may lack such varied terminology for these phenomena, simply because the need

to describe them is less present. In GSL, these terms are used not only in a literal sense but also metaphorically—there are over 100 related proverbs and sayings. Similarly, other sign languages, like Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK), draw from their own cultural roots, incorporating references to national folklore and seasonal festivals. These culturally embedded signs serve not just as tools for communication, but also as expressions of cultural identity and community connection.

Emotional expression in sign language also varies according to cultural expectations. For instance, GSL is marked by its dramatic and expressive gestures, in line with Greek conversational style, while Danish Sign Language (DGS) reflects a more understated, direct communication style consistent with Nordic cultural norms. In France, the aesthetics of theatre and storytelling influence LSF, giving it a rhythm and expressiveness unique to French culture. These characteristics help define how Deaf people express and perceive emotions and interactions within their communities.

Moreover, food and national identity are closely tied to sign language. British Sign Language (BSL) contains regional signs for items such as “fish and chips,” reflecting local cuisines. Similarly, German Sign Language includes variations for everyday items like “beer” or “breakfast”

depending on the region, reinforcing local dialects and identities.

A specific example of how French culture influences a sign in French Sign Language (LSF) is the sign for “wine.” Wine is deeply woven into French tradition and cuisine, making it a culturally significant concept.

The sign for “wine” in LSF typically involves miming the motion of holding a wine glass and bringing it to the lips, with a slight twist of the wrist, reminiscent of swirling wine in a glass. This gesture elegantly reflects the French cultural practice of savoring wine and its importance in social and culinary settings.

These culturally driven variations help shape the linguistic landscape of sign languages, adding richness but also posing challenges for standardization across wider regions.

3. Influence of Visual Culture on Sign Language

Visual culture — encompassing arts, architecture, and design — is a powerful force in shaping the development and richness of sign languages. Deaf theatre, in particular, provides a unique platform for linguistic experimentation and community expression. In France, LSF is celebrated for its theatrical qualities, often used

in performance poetry and stage plays. German Deaf theatre groups and events such as ViFest allow for the creative blending of visual storytelling and language, pushing the boundaries of conventional sign usage.

Belgium offers a vivid example of this influence through the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, where exhibitions like “When We See Us” have inspired new signs. These exhibitions create a dialogue between visual stimuli and sign expression, expanding vocabulary and encouraging interpretive flexibility. The same is observed in Greece, where art installations and signed tours at the National Museum of Contemporary Art help Deaf visitors interact meaningfully with visual content, reinforcing cultural identity.

Architecture and spatial design also contribute significantly. Public spaces in Austria and Denmark are often planned with visual accessibility in mind, influencing how sign language is used in daily life. Open layouts, good lighting, and stage arrangements in theatres are designed to enhance the clarity of gestures and facial expressions, supporting effective communication. Photography, fashion, and visual metaphors further enrich sign languages, especially among younger generations, who often use social media platforms to share expressive content that combines visual aesthetics with sign.

A great addition to your beautifully developed section could be Portugal, which has made notable strides in integrating Deaf culture into its visual arts scene. In Lisbon, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has hosted inclusive exhibitions with Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) interpretation, allowing Deaf visitors to engage deeply with contemporary art. The annual *Festival Mental* also includes signed performances and visual storytelling workshops, fostering creative expression within the Deaf community. Moreover, collaborations between Deaf artists and visual designers have led to the creation of new signs inspired by abstract art and mental health themes. These initiatives not only expand the expressive range of LGP but also promote cultural participation and visibility for Deaf individuals in Portugal’s vibrant artistic landscape.

Another great example comes from Finland, where Deaf culture and visual expression are deeply supported through inclusive arts initiatives. The Finnish Association of the Deaf collaborates with museums and cultural institutions to provide signed tours and visual storytelling experiences in Finnish Sign Language (FinSL). Events like the Klovnfestivaali (Clown Festival) in Helsinki often feature Deaf performers who blend physical theatre with sign language, creating visually rich performances that resonate with both Deaf and hearing audiences. Additionally, the Theatre Totti, Finland’s Deaf theatre company, regularly stages

productions that explore identity, language, and accessibility through innovative visual staging. These efforts not only expand the expressive range of FinSL but also foster a strong sense of cultural pride and artistic visibility within the Deaf community.

4. Influence of Technology and Other Non-Cultural Factors

Technology has become one of the most significant modern forces shaping the evolution and accessibility of sign languages. Social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have empowered Deaf creators to share videos, tutorials, and vlogs in sign language. This not only increases exposure but also fosters the spread of innovative signs and new slang, particularly among younger users. In Belgium, the VGTC's "Sign of the Year" initiative demonstrates how technology reflects and shapes cultural dialogue within the Deaf community.

Artificial intelligence and real-time communication tools are further revolutionizing access. In Austria and Germany, platforms like AVA, SignAll, and GIB Online offer speech-to-text or gesture-recognition services that enhance real-time interaction. Projects in Ghent and Graz aim to develop AI-based transcription and interpretation software that could standardize and streamline



translation efforts. These tools are crucial in bridging communication gaps, especially in public services and educational contexts.

Outside of technology, educational systems have an equally profound impact. Lithuania's investment in a comprehensive five-volume LGK dictionary and Cyprus's efforts to document CSL grammar are examples of how formal resources can help structure and preserve sign languages.

However, inconsistencies persist in sign language interpreter training and curriculum design across countries. Institutional support, such as Deaf-led advocacy organizations in Poland, the UK, and the US, also helps push for policy change and improve access to cultural life. As these factors converge, sign language becomes more accessible, inclusive, and dynamic — though concerns remain about the risks of over-standardization or cultural dilution.

5. Conclusion – Summary of everything

Sign languages across the globe are vibrant, living systems that evolve in response to a wide array of influences — historical, cultural, visual, technological, and political. The case studies from the 13 countries examined highlight both unique national developments and shared challenges. Historically, many sign languages began in formal education settings but were later suppressed by oralist policies. Despite this, the Deaf community preserved and developed its linguistic identity, often through informal and grassroots means.

Cultural context plays a critical role in sign formation and usage. From religious customs and culinary traditions to emotional expression and national aesthetics, sign languages reflect the

values and way of life of their users. Visual culture further enriches these languages, with art, architecture, and public design contributing both vocabulary and expressive style. Technological innovations have helped sign languages flourish in the digital age, offering platforms for dissemination, tools for interpretation, and new channels for advocacy and education.

Nonetheless, systemic challenges remain: standardization, interpreter availability, media representation, and educational equity. Some countries are ahead in legislative support and institutional engagement, while others continue to rely on grassroots activism. Moving forward, a key objective should be the co-creation of inclusive cultural policies that center Deaf voices and recognize sign language as both a linguistic system and a cultural asset. Only through such efforts can we ensure that Deaf communities are not just included, but empowered as equal participants and creators in cultural life.

As we look ahead, ensuring the continued vitality of sign languages requires a multipronged approach. First, educational curricula must prioritize early and accessible sign language learning, particularly from native signers. This supports both language acquisition and cultural identity development. Secondly, greater investment in training culturally competent interpreters is essential to ensure quality access in public life—from museums to hospitals, courts, and media.

Third, inclusion in mainstream media should move beyond tokenism. Representation should reflect authentic Deaf experiences and involve Deaf actors, directors, and consultants. In this way, sign languages are not just “accommodated” but celebrated as valid linguistic and cultural expressions. Countries like France and Germany, where Deaf theatre and visual storytelling thrive, demonstrate the power of cultural engagement. Finally, policymaking should include Deaf voices from the outset. The success of legislative initiatives in Denmark, Poland, and the UK shows that inclusive policy frameworks are achievable when governments collaborate with Deaf communities.

Recognition, though important, is only the first step—systematic implementation, funding, and visibility are key to long-term success.

By aligning legal, cultural, educational, and technological strategies, societies can create a more inclusive future where sign language flourishes as a core component of cultural diversity and human rights.





A snapshot of selected countries



Austria

Austria has a longstanding history of deaf education, beginning in 1779 when the first school for the deaf in Vienna was established, influenced by Abbé de l'Epée's Paris school; it eventually became the third government-sponsored institution of its kind in Europe. The school initially employed a mixed method, by combining signs, manual alphabets, and spoken language; however, Austria shifted to the "oralist" method in 1867, following international trends solidified by the 1880 Milan Congress.

Over time, Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) has become a vital component of deaf identity and

culture, much like in other countries around the world. It was legally recognized in 2005 and spread throughout the country, generating regional dialects as well. The Austrian National Association of the Deaf (ÖGLB) collaborates with academic bodies to standardize and preserve ÖGS, while advocating for bilingual education and interpreter training programs. Moreover, the University of Graz remains the only institution offering bachelor's and master's degrees in sign language interpretation in the country.

Austria supports its deaf community through inclusive design of public spaces, such as schools and theatres, ensuring optimal visual communication environments. Cultural accessibility is also expanding through museums and exhibitions, namely the traveling project "Hands Up", designed to bridge hearing and deaf communities.

The rise of technology has significantly improved accessibility and social integration for deaf individuals in Austria. Applications like AVA, SignAll, GIB Online, Zoom, Skype, and Glide enhance real-time communication, speech-to-text transcription, and sign language interpretation. Online platforms like gebaerdenwelt.tv also provide daily news in sign language.

Overall, Austria's commitment to deaf education, cultural inclusion, and technological support

underlines a progressive development towards the full societal integration of the deaf community.



Belgium

Belgium is home to three distinct sign languages: Flemish Sign Language (VGT), Belgian French Sign Language (LSFB), and German Sign Language (DGS). While LSFB and VGT were officially recognized in 2003 and 2006 respectively, they continue to develop not only linguistically but also culturally, through their deep interaction with the arts, architecture, and technology.

Visual culture plays a central role in the evolution of sign language in Belgium. Institutions like BOZAR - Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels - offer sign language-guided exhibitions, such as *When We See Us*, which showcases Pan-African art and inspires new sign formations through the imitation of shapes and movements in the artworks. Also, visits to historic buildings and architecture have led to the creation of signs that visually depict these structures, enhancing spatial vocabulary in VGT and LSFB.

A crucial historical moment in Belgium's cultural development was the first full theatrical production in VGT, staged in 2025 at Bourla Schouwburg in Antwerp. The production saw the

collaboration between Deaf and hearing actors, introducing new dramatic elements into sign language and helping advance both linguistic and artistic expression within the Deaf community. Such initiatives allow the contribution and experiencing of national cultural life by both deaf and hearing citizens at equal levels, thus fostering true inclusion and integration.

Moreover, courses in visual description and sign language innovation, such as those offered by platforms like *VGT Leren*, equip Deaf individuals with the tools to expand their expressive capacity, especially when discussing abstract concepts or describing complex imagery. This process not only strengthens personal identity within the Deaf community but also drives creative linguistic evolution. Meanwhile, the Flemish Sign Language Centre (VGTC) plays a pivotal role in documenting new signs and curating the annual “Sign of the Year,” aiming to reflect major societal themes and promote community engagement – in 2024, “*autism*” was the featured sign.

Technology further accelerates the cultural integration of the deaf communities. The use of platforms (TikTok, Netflix, various apps like AI and Deaf Belgians) provide space for the creation of new signs, influencing the digital age. Ongoing research, such as that at the University of Ghent, supports the development of AI-based

transcription tools, ensuring that sign language remains a modern, relevant, and empowered means of communication and cultural identity.

In essence, Belgium’s sign languages are more than tools for communication - they are living cultural systems that evolve through art, education, technology, and community collaboration. The ongoing recognition and enrichment of VGT and LSFB highlight Belgium’s commitment to linguistic diversity, cultural inclusion, and the empowerment of its Deaf communities in every aspects of life.



Cyprus

Note: *this summary reflects the development of Cypriot Sign Language and the Deaf community living in the Republic of Cyprus. It does not reflect the Turkish Cypriot deaf community, which reportedly uses the Turkish Sign Language.*

Cypriot Sign Language (CSL) emerged rather later compared to other European countries, specifically in the mid-20th century, as a major form of communication and cultural identity for the deaf community in the Republic of Cyprus. As a relatively new and evolving language, CSL reflects the unique socio-cultural experiences of its users. A major positive development was the legal recognition of CSL in 2006, which paved the

way for official efforts to incorporate it into public services, education, and interpreter training. This law, supported by the Ministry of Education and the Federation of the Deaf, led to important initiatives like the documentation of CSL grammar and the creation of a conceptual lexicon. Additionally, the integration of CSL into cultural events - such as accessible theatrical performances and national festivals - has promoted awareness and inclusion of deaf individuals in cultural life.

Traditional Cypriot customs also find their way into CSL, enriching the language with cultural specificity. For example, the sign for “Easter” mimics egg tapping, a locally cherished tradition. Youth-led innovations, like the development of the “SignPocket” app and CSL videos on YouTube, reflect a growing digital presence and increased independence for deaf individuals.

However, challenges persist. Despite its legal recognition, CSL has not yet been fully standardized or registered, leading to regional and personal variations in its use and teaching. The absence of an official, widely adopted CSL dictionary makes it difficult to ensure consistent language transmission from one generation to another. In education, each interpreter or instructor often relies on self-developed materials, resulting in inconsistent quality which reflect local interpretations.



In some areas, cultural participation remains limited. CSL is still largely absent from mainstream media, with only one national television station offering a sign-interpreted news segment. Furthermore, the small size of the deaf community (estimated at 750–1,000 individuals) and the late start of structured deaf education in Cyprus have contributed to a slower pace of cultural development compared to other countries.

Nonetheless, deaf clubs, athletics, and social gatherings offer vital spaces for identity formation, socialization, and activism among deaf individuals. These community hubs play a central role

in preserving deaf culture and advocating for legislative changes. Yet, the need for continued support, visibility, and resources is evident, especially for future generations.

The cultural landscape of the Cypriot deaf community reveals a story of resilience, creativity, and gradual progress. While significant strides have been made in the recognition and promotion of CSL and deaf culture, gaps in standardization, access, and representation remain. Strengthening both institutional support and grassroots initiatives will be key to securing a richer and more inclusive cultural future for Cyprus's deaf population.



Denmark

Danish Sign Language (DGS) has evolved alongside Denmark's progressive cultural values, education system, and technological innovations. Dating back to the early 19th century, DGS reflects the historical journey and cultural identity of the Deaf community in Denmark.

DGS was officially recognised in 2014 as equivalent to the Danish spoken language, affirming the Deaf community's linguistic rights. Denmark's emphasis on equality, inclusivity, and social welfare has facilitated access to education, public services, and media representation in

DGS. Various institutions – e.g. the Danish Deaf Association and Deaf schools - have pivotal roles in promoting Deaf culture and preserving DGS as a language where identity and communication is established and enhanced throughout the social spectrum.

Culturally, DGS is rich in expressions, reflecting national traditions, like unique signs for holidays and, even, royal family news. The country is strong concerning its visual arts and theatre scenery; it includes Deaf theatre groups, shaping the expressive and performative nature of DGS. Architecture and public spaces are also designed with visual accessibility in mind, enhancing everyday use of the language.

Technology has further supported the Deaf community through innovations in sign recognition tools, online education, and social media. Platforms like YouTube and streaming services have increased visibility and acceptance of DGS, allowing for the development of new signs and digital expressions.

However, challenges persist. Regional dialects and varying educational approaches have led to inconsistencies in DGS usage, and standardization of the language has been achieved to some extent, these regional differences may cause communication barriers. Historically, sign language research and recognition were delayed;

only after the 1970s did linguists begin to study DGS seriously, following global shifts in perception of sign languages.

Although media representation of DGS has improved, it is still limited compared to spoken Danish. Not all public broadcasts or cultural events offer interpretation (like in the case of Cyprus) while Deaf representation in mainstream content is still sparse. Also, bilingualism among Deaf individuals in both Danish and DGS can sometimes result in the influence of Danish grammar, creating tension between linguistic authenticity and ease of communication.

All in all, DSL is a dynamic reflection of Denmark's inclusive society, represented through its visual culture, educational institutions, and accessibility. While DGS has achieved recognition and cultural integration, efforts are still needed to address regional variation, expand media inclusion, and preserve its distinct linguistic identity.



French Sign Language (Langue des Signes Française - LSF) is a highly expressive visual-manual language used by over 100,000 individuals across France. Its legacy dates back to the 18th century, reflecting deep cultural, artistic, and philosophical values of French society. The



cultural foundation of LSF lies in its historical roots, especially the work of Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who helped establish the French Deaf education in the 18th-century. A major milestone came in 2005 when LSF was officially recognized by the French government, legitimizing its status and paving the way for increased visibility and use in education.

French culture, with a focus on expression, aesthetics, and emotion, is deeply embedded in LSF. The language is reflected within French traditions – e.g. signs representing wine and theatre, gestures reflecting national pride and

regional variation. Visual culture, including theatre, film, and design, has influenced LSF's dramatic and spatial expressiveness, enriching its role in both culture and communication.

Technology has also contributed positively in the development of LSF. Social media, video platforms, and online learning have made LSF more accessible, enhanced community engagement, and supported the development of new vocabulary, particularly in response to modern events like the COVID-19 pandemic or environmental movements.

However, the legacy of oralism (following the 1880 Milan Congress) led to the suppression of sign language in schools for nearly a century. This historical marginalization still affects perceptions of LSF today, and despite its recognition, societal and institutional support can be inconsistent. For example, the number of certified interpreters (around 400) is not sufficient to meet the various demands, causing limits to accessibility in education, healthcare, and public services.

Regional dialects also introduce challenges for standardization and cohesion. The influence of spoken French can blur linguistic boundaries, especially among bilingual Deaf individuals. Also, while media representation is improving, LSF is still underrepresented in mainstream content compared to spoken French.



FSL is a likely reflection of France's cultural identity - shaped by history, enriched by art, and driven by the Deaf community. While progress has been made in recognition, education, and visibility, ongoing challenges related to accessibility, availability of interpreters, and societal biases remain to be addressed.



Germany

German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache - DGS) is a dynamic and expressive language shaped by centuries of Deaf history

and German cultural values. It was officially recognised in 2002, serving as both a means of communication and a symbol of cultural identity for the country's Deaf community.

The history of DGS dates back in the Enlightenment era, with oralism dominating Deaf education and therefore minimizing the role of sign language. Only in the 1960s and 1970s – due to increased international linguistic research – the situation shifted. The foundation of the German Deaf Association and the Institute for German Sign Language were key developments that positively influenced the legal recognition of DGS in 2002, marking a major milestone for Deaf rights and language preservation.

DGS reflects regional and cultural diversity within Germany. Regional dialects of DGS are observed, shaped by local customs – e.g. there are different signs for “breakfast” or “beer” used in Berlin compared to Bavaria. These variations highlight cultural richness but also pose challenges to standardization, as only 60–70% of DGS signs are standardized across the country.

Moreover, German visual culture strongly influences DGS. From architecture and design to theatre and festivals, Deaf culture thrives through visual expression. Performances by Deaf theatre groups, like Gehörlosen Theater Dortmund and festivals like ViFest, offer Deaf individuals

various platforms to express their identity. Also, programs like Sehen statt Hören (“Seeing Instead of Hearing”) on national television increase media representation, though such coverage remains limited compared to mainstream content.

Technology and social media have introduced new means for expression and visibility. Influencers like Laura M. Schwengber have popularized DGS through music interpretation and digital outreach. Platforms like Taubenschlag and Duomano provide vital resources, education, and cultural insights, bringing Deaf and hearing communities closer.

Despite these advances, accessibility issues persist. Not all public services or media offer consistent DGS interpretation, while awareness of Deaf culture to the general public remains incomplete. The legacy of oralism is still observed within educational institutions, and Deaf individuals may face barriers in accessing higher education or employment opportunities.

Overall, GSL and Deaf culture illustrate a resilient journey toward visibility, identity, and inclusion. Cultural richness is evident in regional sign variations, arts, and engagement through technology. While significant progress has been made, continued efforts are needed to ensure full societal integration, equitable access, and consistent recognition of DGS as a language and cultural expression.



Great Britain

British Sign Language (BSL) has a rich and complex history rooted in community resilience and cultural identity. It originated in the 16th century and has evolved through community-based communication; today, BSL is a fully recognized language, legally acknowledged in the UK since 2003 and formally legislated through the British Sign Language Act 2022.

Over 87,000 Deaf individuals in the UK use BSL, estimating approximately 151,000 users in total. It is an entirely different language, distinct from spoken or written English, as it relies on the use of facial expressions, handshapes, and spatial grammar. This linguistic autonomy has cultivated a strong Deaf cultural identity, celebrated annually during Sign Language Week.

Cultural richness is evident in regional variation across the UK. Signs for common words – like numbers or local cuisine like “fish and chips” – can vary across locations. This diversity highlights the adaptability and cultural depth of BSL, though lack of standardization can pose challenges in education and communication across regions.

The UK’s Deaf community has made significant efforts in increasing visibility and inclusion through media and arts. Television programs like *See Hear* and platforms like LumoTV promote

Deaf voices and BSL storytelling. Theatres such as Definitely Theatre and events like Glastonbury Festival incorporate BSL interpretation, fostering access for deaf individuals. Museums and institutions are also expanding BSL content, offering exhibitions with accessible video guides.

However, barriers remain. Despite improved representation, Deaf individuals still rely heavily on subtitles rather than full BSL integration in mainstream media, leading exclusion and negatively affecting access to services, employment, and education. The historical dominance of oralism in Deaf education also left long-lasting effects on language access and cultural expression, with BSL often used secretly in schools until more inclusive policies emerged in the mid-20th century.

Technological and social media platforms, like YouTube and government-supported channels, have enhanced BSL’s digital presence, allowing Deaf users to access important information and share content. Yet, digital literacy gaps and uneven access to resources continue to affect inclusivity.

Overall, BSL is a cornerstone of Deaf culture in Great Britain, embedded in a unique linguistic and social identity. While progress has been made concerning legal recognition, cultural inclusion, and media visibility, challenges about the standardization of BSL, representation, and

access still remain. These challenges call for increased advocacy, policy support, and inclusive practices in order to ensure the complete social and cultural integration of the Deaf community in the UK.



Greek Sign Language (GSL) is the cornerstone of Deaf identity in Greece, serving as more than a communication method - it represents a long history, cultural expression, and community empowerment. Since its recognition in 2000 and as an equal language by the Greek Parliament in 2017, GSL has grown into a fundamental cultural and linguistic pillar.

GSL reflects Greek cultural values and geography, integrating signs for local traditions, local cuisine, and religious practices. Like spoken Greek, GSL includes metaphorical expressions rooted in the national environment – e.g. its rich vocabulary related to the sea mirrors Greece’s maritime heritage. These elements underscore the positive integration of cultural identity into language.

Cultural expression through GSL is visible in Deaf poetry, theatre, visual arts, and storytelling. Events like the National Festival of Deaf Culture and institutions such as the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf have promoted cultural engagement of the deaf community. In addition, the rise of



Deaf-led digital platforms has allowed creators to share GSL content, fostering peer learning and representation.

As in other European countries, barriers to proper inclusion persist. Most Greek cultural venues offer limited or no signed interpretation. When available, interpretation is often rare or occurs upon request. The lack of Deaf cultural mediators in institutions further restricts meaningful participation. Moreover, in media, Deaf characters are often played by hearing actors, reinforcing stereotypes and this lacking authentic representation.

However, promising developments have emerged. Some museums, like the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), now offer signed tours. EU-funded programs support the training of Deaf artists, and platforms such as Prosvasimo provide accessible content for teachers and learners. Private initiatives, like the accessibility company ATLAS, are helping to expand cultural access through GSL upon request.

Technology and social media have become important tools for empowerment. Deaf influencers and educators use GSL online to share insights into culture, identity, and everyday life. These platforms enable the connection of the community, as well cultural exchange and resistance to marginalization, allowing Deaf individuals to shape their own narratives and pave the way towards their social integration.

GSL is a powerful cultural force that both reflects and contributes to the unique experiences of Deaf individuals in Greece. While legal recognition and cultural participation have improved, significant gaps remain in accessibility and authentic representation. Continued collaboration between institutions, government, and Deaf-led organisations is essential to ensure that Deaf people are fully included in Greece's cultural life - not just as audience, but as creators and performers.



Lithuania

Lithuanian Sign Language (LGK) serves as both a practical communication system and a cultural symbol for the Deaf community in Lithuania. Officially recognized in 1995, LGK reflects national heritage, visual culture, and social inclusion efforts.

The legal recognition of LGK and its protection under laws - such as the Law on Social Integration of Disabled People - mark positive advancements in the cultural validation of the Deaf community. These laws ensure that LGK is recognized as a native language and promoted in education and public life. Linguistic studies and the development of educational resources, including a five-volume dictionary, have strengthened the foundation for cultural transmission and linguistic integrity.

Culturally, LGK integrates symbols from Lithuanian folklore, national holidays, and historical narratives, embedding cultural meaning into everyday communication. Regional diversity enriches LGK through slight variations, although these differences may pose challenges for national standardisation. Still, they reflect the dynamic and adaptable nature of the language.

Visual culture significantly shapes LGK's structure and storytelling techniques. Deaf theatre,

signed poetry, and photography have enhanced the language's expressive capabilities. Artistic influences promote more vivid communication, while educational visuals help reduce regional discrepancies. However, limited mainstream representation of LGK and Deaf culture in Lithuanian public media and institutions can restrict broader societal awareness and inclusion.

Technological progress has been crucial in expanding LGK accessibility. Innovations like Video Relay Services, eye-tracking research, and AI-supported projects like Sign ON have brought communication and education closer to the modern day. Social media has also emerged as a key area for community-building and cultural expression. Yet, the profession of Deaf interpreters is still under development, while their availability remains inconsistent.

When available, Deaf interpreters enrich cultural life in a significant way. Their role in transmitting folklore, participating in media, and interpreting public events strengthens representation and linguistic authenticity. Their impact is growing in Lithuania, but more institutional support is needed to fully establish their role in education and art.

LSL is a living expression of the Deaf identity and resilience in the country. While legislative and technological advances have empowered

the community, greater efforts in increasing representation, sign language interpretation, and cultural participation is essential.



Polish Sign Language (PJM) is the primary language of communication and cultural identity for the Deaf community in Poland. The development of PJM dates back to the 19th century, but only gained legal recognition in 2011, following a long history of marginalization. PJM has deep historical roots, influenced by French Sign Language and shaped by regional diversity during Poland's partition era. Regional variations in vocabulary and gestures are observed, highlighting richness and adaptability of PJM across areas. Facial expressions, body language, and spatial structuring are used to convey meanings, reflecting PJM's visual and emotional expressiveness.

Culturally, PJM has laid the foundations for the development of a distinct Deaf identity in Poland. Deaf-led events, performances, and film screenings – particularly in major cities – create safe, inclusive cultural spaces where language and identity are celebrated. Events often lead to the emergence of new signs, which then spread through community interaction among deaf individuals as well as social media. This reflects PJM's dynamic and evolving nature.



For over a century, oralist education suppressed sign language use, forcing Deaf students to lip-read and speak, often causing troubles for effective communication and identity development among the deaf community. This negative legacy still influences societal attitudes; some hearing parents discourage the use of PJM, fearing it will hinder speech development. Also, PJM and spoken Polish differ in grammar, making reading and writing in Polish difficult for many Deaf individuals.

Despite the 2011 Act on Sign Language, practical enforcement is inconsistent. Public institutions

often do not provide mandatory sign language interpretation. Access to culture is also uneven, with most initiatives happening in large urban areas, limiting participation for Deaf individuals in the region.

However, technological advancements and online platforms have positively impacted Deaf culture. Vlogs, social media, and video communication allow for quick dissemination of information and the emergence of new vocabulary. Deaf creators also play an increasing role in shaping accessible and culturally relevant content.

While there have been important advances, greater commitment is needed to ensure consistent accessibility, bilingual education, and equal cultural participation. PJM continues to evolve through technology, community engagement, and creative expression, embodying the strength and unity of Poland's Deaf community.



Portugal

Portugal's history of deaf education began in 1823 with the founding of the first school for the deaf in Lisbon by Swedish educator Pär Aron Borg. Influenced by Swedish Sign Language, this institution laid the foundation for Portuguese Sign Language (Língua Gestual Portuguesa – LGP). Despite setbacks following the 1880 Milan

Congress, which promoted oralism, LGP endured and evolved within the Deaf community. In 1997, LGP was officially recognized in the Portuguese Constitution as a cultural expression and a tool for educational access and equal opportunity.

Today, LGP is used across the country, with regional variations reflecting local Deaf communities. The Deaf Association of Portugal (Federação Portuguesa das Associações de Surdos – FPAS) plays a central role in advocating for Deaf rights, interpreter training, and inclusive education. Universities in Lisbon and Porto offer programs in sign language interpretation and Deaf studies, contributing to academic and professional development.

Portugal promotes cultural inclusion through initiatives like signed museum tours at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and art festivals such as Festival Mental, which features signed performances and workshops. These efforts foster creative expression and cultural participation among Deaf individuals.

Technological tools such as AVA and Glide are increasingly used in Portugal to support real-time communication. Public television includes subtitled and signed content, and online platforms like LGP TV provide news and educational resources in sign language. These developments reflect Portugal's growing commitment to accessibility and Deaf empowerment.



Finland

Finland's journey in Deaf education began in 1846 when Carl Oscar Malm, a Deaf educator trained in Sweden, established the country's first school for the Deaf in Porvoo. Malm introduced Swedish Sign Language as the language of instruction, emphasizing bilingual education through both sign and written language. His legacy laid the groundwork for Finnish Sign Language (FinSL), which was later shaped by local Deaf communities and officially recognized in 1995.



FinSL is now a cornerstone of Deaf identity in Finland, supported by the Finnish Association of the Deaf (Kuurojen Liitto), which advocates for linguistic rights, interpreter services, and inclusive education. Finland is also home to Teatteri Totti, the country's only sign language theatre, founded in 1987, which stages performances that explore Deaf culture and language through visual storytelling.

Cultural institutions such as the Finnish Museum of the Deaf and the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas preserve and promote Deaf heritage. Signed tours and exhibitions are common in museums, and events like the Klovnistapaaminen in Helsinki feature Deaf performers who blend physical theatre with FinSL.

Finland embraces technology to enhance accessibility, with platforms like AVA and SignAll supporting real-time communication. Social media and video-sharing platforms are widely used by younger generations to share FinSL content, reinforcing community bonds and linguistic innovation.



United States of America

American Sign Language (ASL) emerged in 1817, when the American School for the Deaf was founded in Hartford (Connecticut). This major moment in ASL history was the result

of a collaboration between Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and French educator Laurent Clerc, blending French Sign Language (FSL) with local home signs used by deaf Americans. This formed the basis of ASL, a unique language with its own grammar and structure that later gained academic legitimacy through William Stokoe's groundbreaking research in 1960.

Culturally, ASL has experienced both oppression and celebration. In the late 19th century, the Oralism Movement marginalised ASL by prioritizing speech over sign, leading to the oppression of Deaf culture and linguistic expression.



However, resistance movements such as the 1988 Deaf President Now campaign caused a turning point, asserting the Deaf community's right to linguistic and cultural autonomy. These events turned ASL from a stigmatised mode of communication to a symbol of identity and pride for the deaf individuals.

Regional and racial diversity has shaped ASL significantly. For instance, Black American Sign Language (BASL) reflects the distinct experiences of Black Deaf communities, while regional dialects reflect cultural and social variance across the country. In addition, Native American influences, like Plains Indian Sign Language, enhance ASL's expressive richness.

Visual culture is deeply embedded in ASL - from the design of Deaf-friendly spaces to the artistic expressions in sign, fashion, and architecture. Contemporary designers like Chella Man and Jenni Ahtiainen use fashion to empower Deaf identity, transforming assistive devices into artistic statements.

Moreover, media and technology have further influenced ASL's cultural evolution. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube promote ASL among the youth but also introduce simplified signs that may diverge from traditional forms. Technological tools such as smart gloves and learning apps have increased ASL's accessibility, though some fear they could dilute cultural authenticity.

Despite these tensions, ASL continues to thrive as a dynamic language that bridges identity, art, and technology. Its development reflects not only linguistic innovation but also a resilient cultural heritage shaped by struggle, creativity, and community.







Main cultural elements that influence sign language

The analysis of expert interviews clearly indicates that culture has a multifaceted influence on sign language, which constitutes an integral part of Deaf identity. As a natural visual-spatial language, sign language does not exist in isolation from cultural context; rather, it directly reflects the lived experiences, values, norms, and worldview of the Deaf community. One of the central themes highlighted by the respondents is the role of Deaf-created culture. It is within this culture — through theater, sign poetry, visual arts, and cultural events dedicated to the Deaf community — that sign language develops most dynamically. In these spaces, the language is not only a tool for communication but also a medium of artistic expression and a vehicle for building community bonds. As a result, sign

language expands stylistically, incorporating visual metaphors, idioms, and symbolic gestures that are unique and meaningful within the Deaf cultural framework.

At the same time, mainstream or mass culture also influences sign language, albeit more indirectly. Popular media, global events, and emerging technologies introduce new concepts that require the creation of new signs. This ongoing evolution ensures that sign language remains current and adaptable. However, the assimilation of mainstream culture is often hindered by barriers such as limited accessibility, lack of trained interpreters, and insufficient cultural understanding among organizers, which restricts full participation by Deaf individuals. Importantly, cultural participation — both within Deaf spaces and in broader cultural contexts — plays a key role in shaping Deaf identity. Respondents emphasize that engagement with sign language in cultural settings strengthens a sense of belonging, fosters self-acceptance, and contributes to a positive self-image as a Deaf person. For many, especially youth, such experiences are formative, allowing them to find their voice and recognize the legitimacy and richness of their language and cultural heritage. The interviews also confirm that sign language and Deaf culture are inextricably linked — one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, any efforts to promote sign language must also include the recognition and support

of Deaf culture as a valuable and unique form of social expression. Creating inclusive cultural spaces not only nurtures the growth of sign language but also promotes social diversity and a broader sense of inclusion.

Key Cultural Elements Influencing Sign Language

1. Deaf-created culture

Sign language develops most dynamically within spaces created by the Deaf community itself. Festivals, theatrical performances, sign language poetry, films, and other visual art forms are not only modes of expression but also environments of linguistic innovation. These contexts give rise to new signs, visual metaphors, and idioms that reflect the unique experiences of Deaf people. In this way, sign language becomes not just a communication tool but a medium of cultural creativity.

2. Community and shared experiences

The collective history of the Deaf community — shaped by struggles for linguistic rights, emancipation, and recognition of sign language as a full-fledged language — has a significant impact on its structure and use. Sign language



captures collective experiences of exclusion, resilience, and the pursuit of equality. Within the community, common communicative and narrative strategies emerge, reinforcing group identity and solidarity.

3. Social norms and cultural values of the deaf community

Deaf culture has its own unique set of norms and values that directly influence communication

practices. For instance, ways of attracting attention, turn-taking in conversation, maintaining eye contact, and the use of spatial references are culturally regulated. These norms are embedded in the grammar and structure of sign language and shape how interactions unfold.

4. Art and visual expression

Artistic expression by Deaf individuals — such as sign language poetry, Deaf theater, and visual storytelling — pushes the boundaries of sign language in its most expressive forms. Deaf artists experiment with rhythm, spatial structure, pacing, and gesture in ways that transcend everyday usage. This artistic innovation contributes to the development of new grammatical structures, metaphors, and expressive tools that often find their way into mainstream communication.

5. Mass culture and media

Contemporary mass culture — films, music, public events — requires sign language to adapt to an ever-changing world. New signs are created to match emerging concepts, terms, and phenomena that previously had no equivalents in sign language. Deaf individuals often take the initiative to develop sign language equivalents for new vocabulary, expanding and enriching the lexicon.

6. Education and intergenerational transmission

How sign language is taught and passed down through generations greatly influences its vitality and evolution. In environments where sign language is acquired from early childhood, it is learned more completely and used more creatively. Educational approaches aligned with Deaf cultural identity help reinforce linguistic competence and foster diversity. On the other hand, limited access to inclusive education may hinder the development of the language.

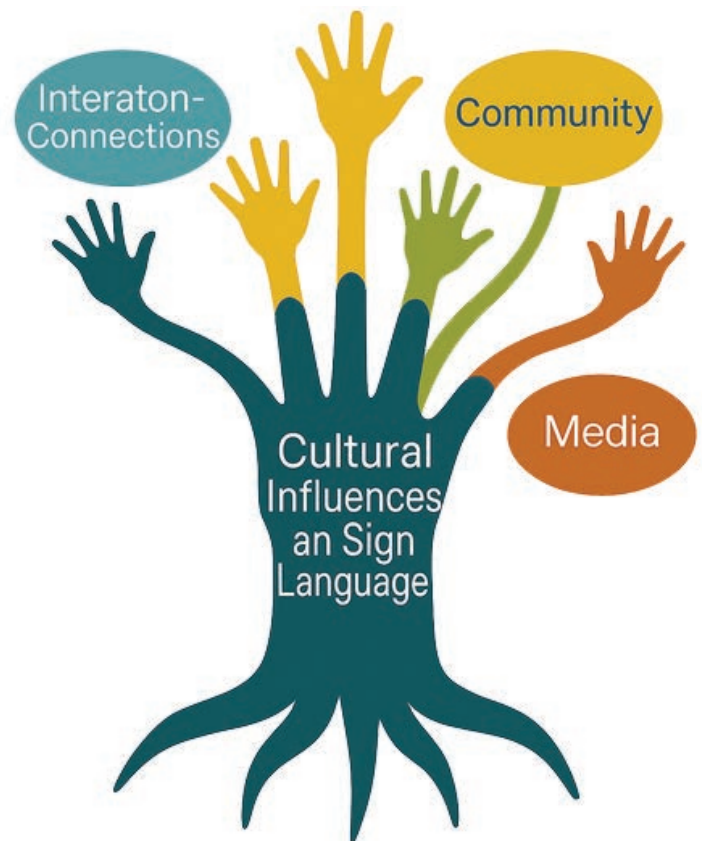
Important areas

The influence of media and the Internet on the development of Sign Language

- > The Internet, social media, and blogs are the primary spaces for the exchange of signs and information among Deaf people.
- > New signs are often borrowed from other sign languages, particularly IS (International Sign) and ASL (American Sign Language).
- > A “hybrid language” is emerging – especially among younger users.
- > These media accelerate the evolution of sign language and broaden its reach beyond local communities.

- > The popularity of visual content (films, comics, vlogs) supports the creation of new signs.

Digital media should be actively used to create and promote educational resources in sign language. Training sessions should highlight the importance of online spaces as arenas for language development and community integration.



The role of Deaf cultural events in language development and community building

- Deaf-led events support the creation and dissemination of new signs.
- The sign language used at these events is natural, expressive, and culturally rooted – distinct from interpreted mainstream language.
- “Deaf-for-Deaf” gatherings reinforce a sense of identity and community.
- No translation is needed – communication is direct, promoting full linguistic development.

It is worth promoting Deaf culture as a natural environment for the evolution of sign language. A training module could be developed to show how native cultural experiences support language development and a sense of belonging.

Barriers to Deaf participation in mainstream culture

- The main barrier: absence of sign language interpretation or improper placement of the interpreter.
- Information about accessibility is often missing – Deaf people are unaware that an event is intended for them.



- Discouraging factors include complex written language, unsuitable content, and lack of direct contact with organisers.
- Organisers are unfamiliar with the needs of Deaf audiences and unaware of good practice principles.

The handbook and training sessions should include a list of common barriers and guidance on how to avoid them. The report may present recommendations for cultural institutions and local authorities regarding accessibility standards.

The role of Sign Language interpreters in cultural events

- > Deaf people prefer interpreters from their own community (Deaf, CODA, native PJM users).
- > Essential factors: clear visibility of the interpreter, expressive facial communication, and subject-matter preparation.
- > Interpretation should be live and contextually adapted (not literal translations).
- > The interpreter's role includes not just "translation" but also "emotional accessibility".

Training sessions and the handbook should emphasize the importance of interpretation quality and appropriate interpreter selection. A checklist for interpreter preparation and guidance for organisers could be included.

Needs and expectations of Deaf audiences towards cultural organisers

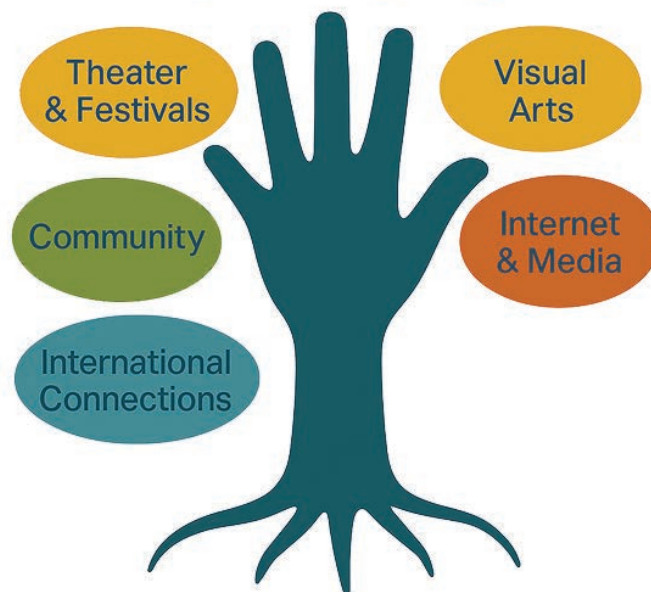
- > Expectations include: live interpretation, plain written language, discounts, and email/SMS contact.
- > Promotional materials should include information about the interpreter, dedicated seating areas, and pictograms.

- > Promotion should be conducted by people from the Deaf community – peer recommendations carry great weight.
- > Invitations in sign language are particularly appreciated.

The training module and handbook should include sample messages, pictograms, and examples of well-prepared promotional materials. It's worth including a model scenario for engaging with Deaf audiences.



Cultural Influences on Sign Language





Other Key Factors Influencing Sign Language

Sign language, as a living and multidimensional system of visual-spatial communication, does not exist in a cultural vacuum. It is deeply embedded within social, economic, educational, and technological structures. To date, research on sign languages has primarily focused on their relationship to Deaf culture – understood as a set of practices, values, and expressive forms characteristic of the Deaf community. However, findings from the *Count me In* project indicate that sign language is also shaped by factors stemming from seemingly unrelated domains, such as the development of digital technologies, educational models, generational change, gender and power relations, as well as migration trajectories and local identity politics. These influences affect not only the internal dynamics

of sign language itself, but also its visibility in public space, accessibility for users, and the ways in which it is transmitted across generations.

Like spoken languages, sign languages undergo processes of evolution. Yet their development is especially responsive to social transformation, since signed communication is grounded in the body, facial expression, and space – channels that directly register changes in social life. Every technological innovation, institutional shift, or transformation of the social landscape can therefore find expression in the structure and aesthetic of a given sign language.

This chapter focuses on these “other” factors – often omitted from traditional cultural analyses, yet crucial to understanding the linguistic practices of Deaf people in Europe. The most significant among them are discussed below:

1. Technologies as an Environment for Linguistic Growth and Innovation

The development of modern digital technologies has played a key role over the past two decades in the dissemination and transformation of sign language. Camera phones, video communication tools (such as FaceTime and Zoom),

social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram), and dedicated translation and educational apps (e.g. HandTalk) or open access repositories –sign language dictionaries (e.g. Spreadthesign) have enabled Deaf people to create and exchange visual content on an unprecedented scale.

In the national reports from the *Count me In* project, it was repeatedly emphasized that the ease of recording and publishing video content has allowed Deaf individuals not only to communicate more frequently and effectively but also to actively co-create language – generating new signs and adapting them to contemporary realities. For instance, interview participants from Poland and Greece indicated that signs like “smartphone,” “YouTube,” “COVID,” or “influencer” first emerged informally among youth and were only later adopted by older signers.

In some countries (such as Denmark or Germany), content created by Deaf individuals has acquired a quasi-culture-shaping status. Deaf vloggers (so-called “sign bloggers”), such as members of the Deaf Youth Denmark collective or the creators of the German channel *Gebärdenwelt TV*, influence how young signers learn, interpret reality, and even set linguistic trends. This phenomenon resembles the “linguistic vitality of the street” familiar from urban linguistics–innovations appear spontaneously, may be fleeting, but often leave a lasting mark on linguistic practice.



At the same time, technology facilitates the creation of linguistic resources – online dictionaries, sign databases, educational materials. In Belgium, Austria, and Cyprus, such efforts are led by Deaf organizations in collaboration with universities and cultural institutions. This is not merely documentation – it is an expression of linguistic autonomy: Deaf people are no longer just users of the language, but curators and creators of its linguistic space.

Among respondents, critical voices also emerged: some AI-based translation tools (e.g., 3D avatars or AI interpreters) are currently too simplistic to convey the complexity of sign language – especially its emotional and rhythmic dimensions. Their presence raises questions about the future of interpreter work, the aesthetics of communication, and the potential risk of standardization that could threaten the diversity of local dialects.

2. Generational and Identity-Based Factors: Differences, Tensions, and New Linguistic Worlds

Generational differences within Deaf communities manifest not only in values or lifestyles, but – perhaps most profoundly – in language itself. As a system deeply rooted in everyday experience and social context, sign language reflects such shifts with particular intensity.

Analysis of the interviews conducted in the *Count me In* project reveals that younger generations of sign language users (especially those born after 2000) often use a markedly different set of signs than their older counterparts. Young respondents from Poland, France, and Greece spoke of the need to “update” the language to keep pace with a changing world. New signs have emerged to describe concepts that were



either unfamiliar or nonexistent just a decade ago: “gender,” “streaming,” “depression,” “non-binary,” “podcast.”

In Poland and Cyprus, instances were observed where the older generation perceived such innovations as a threat to linguistic continuity, while younger users viewed them as a natural expression of identity and generational belonging. This dynamic fits into the broader process

of “generational code reshaping,” well illustrated by the concept of *translanguaging* – the fluid movement across registers and communicative modes.

Another key factor in the evolution of sign language is the changing landscape of identity. Queer, feminist, pro-ecological, and neurodivergent narratives are becoming increasingly prominent within Deaf communities. Sign language is beginning to absorb these perspectives – through the creation of new signs, reinterpretations of gestures, and even subtle shifts in facial expression.

Reports from Greece and Belgium note that gender-neutral signs are beginning to coexist with traditional male and female variants. While not yet widely adopted, their presence among younger signers is evident and clearly linked to a broader cultural shift in which identity is no longer seen as fixed, but as fluid and processual.

It is also important to highlight the role of young CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults), who grow up in bilingual and bicultural environments and often serve as bridges between the hearing and Deaf worlds. CODAs exert real influence on the evolution of language – introducing elements of spoken language, oral discourse styles, and youth idioms. This phenomenon has been observed in Danish and German research, where Deaf and hearing youth jointly develop a “street sign language”

filled with borrowings, neologisms, and gestures with contextually negotiated meanings.

Generational differences need not lead to conflict – they can generate creative synergy. As one participant in a Greek focus group put it: “The older generation gives us the foundation, the young give us the future. Language lives only when we let it grow, even if we don’t always understand where it’s going.” This simple statement captures both the tension and the potential inherent in generational diversity within Deaf communities.

3. Politics, Education and Activism – Systemic Factors as Forces of Language Transformation

The legal recognition of sign languages is crucial for their status, development, and social visibility. In countries where sign language is protected by law, professional interpreting services, bilingual education, and the representation of the Deaf community in public institutions have emerged. In contrast, where such recognition is lacking, the language remains marginalized, scarcely present in the public sphere, and deprived of institutional support.

While sign language evolves primarily through the everyday practices of its users, the role of

systemic frameworks – political decisions, educational structures, and activist efforts – cannot be overlooked. It is within these frameworks that the interests of authorities, institutions, and the Deaf community intersect. In this context, sign language becomes not only a tool of communication, but also a symbol of autonomy, a means of advocacy, and a vehicle for social change.

a. Recognition of Sign Languages as National Languages

Across Europe, the status of sign language varies widely. In some countries – such as Austria, Denmark, or Belgium – national sign languages have been legally recognized and granted protection. In others, such as in Cyprus, their status remains incomplete, often merely symbolic. According to national reports, legal recognition has a direct impact on the development, standardization, and presence of the language in institutions and media.

In Denmark and Austria, broad access to interpreters, bilingual education, and cultural content in sign language supports its dissemination and organic growth. By contrast, in countries like Cyprus, the lack of strong regulation leads to a reliance on simplified communication forms, limiting linguistic innovation.

In Poland, a positive institutional shift has been the introduction of Polish Sign Language (PJM)

as an elective course at some universities, and the growing presence of sign language interpreting in public media. Though still limited in scope, these developments significantly enhance the visibility and prestige of sign language in the public sphere.

b. Education as a Space of (In)equality in Language

Educational systems play a critical role in how sign language is acquired and developed. Access to bilingual education – combining sign and spoken language – fosters deeper identity expression and richer communicative competencies. The absence of such education may hinder linguistic development and weaken cultural belonging.

Deaf education remains one of the most sensitive areas where systemic forces impact language. On one hand, special and integrated schools serve as sites of language transmission. On the other, they can be sites of exclusion. As shown in the *Count me In* reports, in many countries Deaf education continues to prioritize spoken language (e.g., speech training or lip-reading), which limits the development of natural sign language.

In interviews conducted in Poland, France, and Cyprus, Deaf individuals frequently emphasized the lack of access to education in their own

language. They reported a shortage of teachers fluent in SL, inadequate educational materials, and even bans on using sign language in classrooms – conditions still prevalent for many students.

A stark contrast emerges in Denmark and Germany, where bilingual education produces tangible benefits. Deaf students achieve higher academic outcomes, and sign language develops both formally and creatively. As the Danish report noted: “Deaf children learn sign language not only from adults, but also from one another. The school becomes a living language laboratory.”

It must be remembered that sign language is in constant contact with the dominant spoken language – especially in educational and interpreting contexts. This interaction may lead to the transfer of grammatical structures or vocabulary, affecting the syntax, lexicon, and expressive patterns of sign language.

c. Language Activism: Deaf People as Guardians and Innovators

Social movements and grassroots initiatives within Deaf communities play a vital role in the development and preservation of sign language. Organizations such as the European Union of the Deaf, Deaf Youth Denmark, or the Polish Association of the Deaf engage in advocacy,

organize cultural events, compile dictionaries, and carry out artistic projects involving sign language users.

In Greece, despite the lack of full SL recognition, activists launched online educational campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic. These served not only as reliable information sources but also as tools to strengthen language identity. In Austria, Deaf organizations run mentorship programs in which older users transmit knowledge to younger generations, while documenting local sign variants.

These efforts are not only forms of resistance but also of intentional language stewardship. Deaf people act as “language guardians” – deliberately choosing which signs to preserve, adapt, or replace with new ones.

4. Emotional and Relational Factors – Embodied Expression and Social Contexts

Sign language is more than a set of signs – it is a fully embodied form of expression, in which the body, space, and emotion are inseparably intertwined. Unlike many spoken languages, where emotional expression can be masked by neutral tone or rhetorical convention, sign language reveals emotion directly through physicality. Each

utterance becomes both a social and emotional act – rooted in relationship, context, and physical presence.

a. Facial Expression, Rhythm, and Gesture as Carriers of Emotion

In interviews (IDI and FGI), participants repeatedly reflected that sign language allows one to “see emotion.” Facial expressions, timing, rhythm, and direction of movement all constitute integral parts of a message. Deaf individuals can quickly perceive shifts in mood, intent, or engagement through subtle bodily cues. As one participant in France put it: “It’s not just that you sign for joy. You show it. It comes out of you. If you’re sad but try to smile, a Deaf person will see it in a split second.”

In this sense, sign language is a language of authenticity – harder to fake or mask than spoken language. The body as a communication medium leaves little room for emotional detachment. This fosters a specific relational closeness but can also put users at a disadvantage in formal contexts that require neutrality or restraint.

b. Sign Language as a Relational language and Emotional Support

The idea of a “language of care” appears frequently in national reports – sign language used

in familial, friendly, and therapeutic contexts. On Cyprus and in Poland, respondents emphasized that the lack of emotional expression from interpreters – e.g., in medical or therapeutic settings – can be a serious barrier. Literal translation, devoid of affective tone, distorts the meaning of the message.

“For us, emotion is part of meaning. When you speak about pain, you must show it. Otherwise, you won’t be understood.” (IDI participant, Poland)

For this reason, many Deaf people prefer interacting with other SL users – even if they are not professional interpreters – because relationships built on shared emotionality and embodied empathy often prove more effective than the most precise but expressionless interpretation.

c. Social Closeness as a Condition of Comprehension

Emotional factors also shape communication structure. In intimate contexts – home, school, peer groups – SL users simplify signs, abbreviate gestures, and refer to shared experiences. This gives rise to local micro-dialects – linguistic forms anchored in specific relationships. This phenomenon is particularly evident among youth: in Poland, Denmark, and Lithuania, respondents described “sign slang” understood only within a particular group.

Conversely, lack of emotional connection – such as with bureaucrats – can significantly hinder communication. SL users in such situations reduce expression, gestures become more schematic, and communication loses precision and fluency.

Sign language is not uniform – differences in signs and meanings occur not only between countries but also between regions and educational institutions. This diversity reflects the identity of local Deaf communities but also presents challenges in establishing educational and interpreting standards.

d. Empathy as a Linguistic Competence

The reports repeatedly stress that understanding sign language does not depend solely on knowing the signs. A key factor is the ability to “read the other person” – to recognize emotion, respond to nuance, and attune to the rhythm of the other.

One could say that in sign language, comprehension depends not only on syntactic rules but also on the signer’s empathy – the ability to read all these layers together, to sense emotion, intention, and nuance, and to understand the person behind the signs. In linguistic terms that means prosody, the intended meaning, and the inherent ambiguity or polysemy of the lexicon.



For this reason, many Deaf individuals express distrust toward automatic translation systems – such as avatars or AI-based interpreters – that cannot convey the relational dimension of communication. Though their messages may be technically correct, they are perceived as “empty,” lacking inner truth. As one interviewee in Greece said: “Artificial intelligence may know the words, but it doesn’t know the person. And our language isn’t just words – it’s about being together.”

5. Movement and Space – Sign Language in the Social and Urban Landscape

Although sign language is often perceived primarily as a system of signs, its full understanding requires consideration of the physical and visual space in which it functions. Sign language develops not only within the body of its users, but also in dynamic interaction with natural surroundings—architecture, urban accessibility, and the spatial layout of public environments. In this sense, sign language—more than any spoken language—uses natural space as a medium, actively shaping and navigating it to create syntactic space, where meaning is constructed through movement, positioning, and visual structure.

a. Visibility as a Condition of Language Existence

Sign language requires light, perspective, and open space – its transmission depends on physical visibility. Any visual restriction, limited distance, crowding, or gesture obstruction disrupts communication. As a result, SL users instinctively seek visually accessible spaces – open, clear, and attuned to the rhythm of their language.

In the FGI studies – particularly in Denmark, Greece, and Poland – participants pointed out

that many public spaces are designed solely for spoken communication: ticket counters with no eye contact, windows that reflect light, or escalators preventing visual interaction. Such design features not only hinder understanding but also restrict the expressive capacity of the language.

Conversely, spaces with visual clarity – plazas with low, semicircular benches, museums allowing free movement, and areas filled with natural light – support the full expressive potential of movement in SL.

b. The Rhythm of the Body in Urban Space

In sign language, space is not a passive background – it is an active grammatical tool. The direction of a gesture, the distance between hands, or the spatial “extension” of a sign all carry semantic weight. However, in tight, noisy, or movement-restricted environments, the language contracts – losing its natural rhythm and expression.

Respondents from Poland and Cyprus described situations where they had to abandon full signs in crowded buses, queues, or on sidewalks – replacing them with abbreviated gestures, facial expressions, or complete communication silence. This enforced “minimalism” affects the quality and authenticity of the message.

In Austria and Denmark, participants identified specially designed “signing spaces” – clubs, cafés, libraries, or even public offices with online interpreter access – where SL can flourish, and users feel fully included in the city’s communicative landscape.



c. Sign Language in the Digital Landscape and Cultural Arenas

The development of visual communication in digital spaces – such as Zoom, TikTok, or YouTube – has created a new dimension for signing. In videos, webinars, and social media, SL users explore the aesthetic potential of screen-based expression. Movement on screen becomes both a means of communication and a form of artistic expression.

In Lithuania, France, and Greece, the number of sign language vloggers has grown – creators producing cultural, educational, and lifestyle content. Their activity redefines SL, expanding it with new thematic, metaphorical, and stylistic categories. On one hand, this marks a form of linguistic emancipation; on the other, it influences the language's structure: some signs become “more media” adapted to the rhythm of the camera, editing, or background music.

d. Space as a Dimension of Linguistic Agency

It could be said that sign language takes root where there is space for it to exist. Where urban, digital, and social space opens itself to gesture, SL flourishes – otherwise, it retreats, simplifies, or is confined to the private sphere. In this sense, urban design, educational infrastructure, and

public culture – often unconsciously – act as architects of linguistic reality.

As one participant in Denmark put it: “Sign language is not just our hands. It's also what surrounds us – the world that either makes room for our gestures or clips them.”

6. Migration and Globalisation – The Transcultural Dynamics of Sign Language

In an era of accelerated globalisation and intensified migration, sign languages – as living systems of communication – are undergoing profound transformation. The mobility of Deaf individuals, the growth of international support networks, and cross-border cooperation in education and activism have given rise to a new phenomenon: transcultural sign language intercommunication. At its centre lies International Sign (IS) – a simplified yet highly functional system used primarily during international conferences, cultural events, and live streams aimed at diverse audiences.

Though IS is not a formally standardised language – but rather a set of conventions based on visual iconicity and signs borrowed from various sign languages (especially ASL) – its growing popularity signals the need for a shared field of communication in a globalised Deaf world.



Multilingual signing thus becomes a new form of cultural competence – especially among younger generations engaged in international projects or active on global digital platforms.

However, the same dynamic that fosters exchange also brings potential threats. Increasing use of IS and borrowings from dominant sign languages – primarily ASL – can contribute to the erosion of local and regional SL variants. This phenomenon affects not only vocabulary, but also grammatical, rhythmic, and spatial subtleties characteristic of specific sign languages. In countries with limited documentation of local dialects – such

as Polish Sign Language (PJM) or German Sign Language (DGS) – there is a real risk that less widespread signs may be forgotten or replaced with more “globally recognisable” forms.

Both forced (e.g., refugee) and voluntary (e.g., student or labour) migrations also affect language acquisition strategies. Deaf individuals moving between countries often learn more than one sign language, resulting in hybrid forms of communication. These cases reveal not only multilingualism, but interculturalism in language structure – manifested through symbolic gestures, new idioms, and modified expressive dynamics.



Globalisation is also closely linked to the rapid development of digital media, which – as trans-local tools – foster unification of messaging. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok allow SL content creators to reach wide audiences, but simultaneously promote a certain “aesthetic canon of signing,” often modelled on media-dominant languages (chiefly ASL). This raises questions about the balance between accessibility and linguistic diversity.

Hence, supporting documentation and archiving efforts of local sign language variants becomes essential. At the same time, multilingual education and cultural diversity awareness should be promoted within Deaf communities. Consideration should also be given to developing European strategies for safeguarding Deaf linguistic heritage – similar to existing frameworks for national and regional minority languages.

7. Summary and Recommendations

The data collected – from individual interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGI), and desk research – clearly confirm: sign language is a dynamic system influenced by cultural, generational, emotional, educational, and spatial factors. Each of these dimensions not only shapes the repertoire of signs and communicative rules but also defines the boundaries of social and cultural participation for Deaf individuals. Based on an in-depth analysis of the subtopics discussed in this chapter, the following key conclusions and recommendations are proposed:

1. Recognising Sign Language as a Full-Fledged Language of Culture

Within Europe’s diverse linguistic landscape, it is essential to establish systemic and long-term

recognition of sign language not merely as a communication tool, but as an autonomous language of culture – capable of generating meaning, shaping identity, and transmitting values. We recommend:

- supporting artistic and literary production in sign languages (SL);
- funding educational and cultural projects in which SL is a primary medium, not a supplement;
- creating dedicated cultural spaces for Deaf communities (e.g., sign language theatres, vlogs, galleries).

2. Addressing Generational Dynamics in Educational Projects

Contemporary Deaf communities are internally diverse. Rather than seeking language unification, efforts should be made to:

- engage young Deaf individuals as co-creators of dictionaries, teaching materials, and digital tools.
- foster intergenerational language dialogue (e.g., intergenerational SL workshops);
- document new sign language variants emerging in youth environments;

3. Integrating Sign Language with Mental Health and Care Policies

The emotional and relational nature of SL should serve as a foundation for healthcare systems, psychological support, and social services. We recommend:

- training SL interpreters in empathetic and relational communication;
- developing therapeutic programs led by Deaf or bilingual (hearing/Deaf) professionals;
- recognising SL as a language of care and a tool for emotional support, particularly in work with children, the elderly, and vulnerable groups.

4. Space as a Factor of Linguistic Inclusion

Sign language requires space – physical, social, and symbolic – to grow. Cities, institutions, and digital environments should:

- be designed with the visual nature of SL in mind (lighting, spatial layout, placement of service points);
- include SL presence in the planning of public events, cultural initiatives, and educational programs;
- develop so-called “signing spaces” – environments where sign language can be used naturally and freely.

5. Strengthening the Cultural Agency of Deaf Communities

The most critical factor influencing language is its use – living, contextual, and creative. Therefore:

- > public policies should be co-created with Deaf individuals as experts and leaders;
- > sign language must be present in media, education, and the arts;
- > research and social projects should be based on principles of participation, not mere representation.

8. Final Conclusion

Sign language does not require protection alone – it requires space for growth. What fosters its flourishing is not only legal frameworks and policies but also recognition of its unique logic: bodily, relational, emotional, and cultural. Acknowledging this is a step toward a more inclusive, visible, and culturally aware Europe.

Linguistic Change in Sign Language – Generational, Regional, and Technological Aspects

- > Sign language evolves over time – younger generations introduce new signs, abbreviations, and elements of slang.

- > Regional differences are significant, even in basic signs, which can hinder cross-group communication.
- > The development of technology and specialised education (e.g., thematic dictionaries) leads to partial standardisation of vocabulary.
- > Contact with foreign cultures (e.g., through travel) influences the creation of new signs, narratives, and analogies.

Training and educational materials should reflect linguistic diversity as well as generational and regional differences. A handbook for cultural institutions could include guidance on how to adapt communication to be understandable and accessible to a wide range of sign language users.





Key conclusions and recommendations

Lessons Learned

The implementation of the *Count me In* project – which encompassed qualitative research, desk studies, and analysis of cultural practices across nine European countries – highlighted the complex and multilayered relationships between sign language and culture in its broadest sense. The project participants – Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, CODAs, interpreters, educators, artists, and researchers – consistently emphasized that sign language does not exist in isolation from the world of symbols, values, and social imaginaries. On the contrary, it is shaped by them and, in turn, contributes to shaping them.

1. Sign Language as a Cultural Vehicle: Beyond Communication

Findings from the analyses clearly indicate that sign language is not only a means of transmitting information but also a full-fledged language of culture – in the anthropological sense. As a semiotic system rooted in movement, space, rhythm, and bodily expression, sign language enables not just the description of reality but also the creation of meaning.

It operates more like a multidimensional visual architecture than a linear spoken script—built through space, movement, and expression. Although it adheres to its own grammar and syntax, its communicative force is deeply embedded in social, communal, and emotional contexts. In practice, this means that sign language—especially in its performative form—becomes a poetic, theatrical, and narrative medium that unfolds in three-dimensional space, using movement, positioning, and facial expression not just to convey meaning, but to construct it dynamically through the body.

In Belgium and Germany, respondents emphasized the importance of sign poetry and Deaf theatre as spaces of linguistic innovation. In Poland and Greece, the role of vlogs and video content was highlighted as arenas where new signs emerge, neologisms develop, and Deaf people assert linguistic emancipation.

2. Culture as a Driving Force in Language Evolution

Sign language does not evolve in a vacuum. Like spoken languages, it develops under the influence of cultural trends, social tensions, generational shifts, and technological changes. Respondents in each of the project's partner countries identified specific cultural domains that have significantly shaped the lexicon, style, and use of sign language in recent years:

- > **Popular culture and digital media:** YouTube vlogs, TikTok streams, and short visual formats have become incubators for new signs. In Lithuania and France, it was observed that younger Deaf individuals readily adopt signs inspired by animation, film, and video games.
- > **Art and activism:** Sign language is used as a tool of expression in performance, theatre, and social actions. In Austria and Cyprus, Deaf art was seen as a field of struggle for visibility and identity. New gestures emerged in response to issues such as gender equality, ecology, and migration – carrying ideological weight.
- > **Socio-political change:** In politically tense contexts (e.g., Greece, where the pandemic and economic crises altered public life), signs have emerged linked to protest, restrictions, and the fight for rights.

- **Transcultural influences:** With growing mobility and digital presence of Deaf individuals, sign languages increasingly transcend national borders. Respondents from Denmark and Germany noted the influence of American Sign Language (ASL) among youth, reflected in the aesthetics of video clips and sign-language memes.

3. Deaf Communities as Agents of Linguistic Change

The research revealed that linguistic innovation in sign language is largely driven from the grassroots level by the Deaf community itself, often in opposition to formal standardizing institutions. Deaf individuals create new signs, test them, share them on social media, and embed them in artistic and social narratives.

At the same time, many participants expressed concerns: Is there a risk of excessive fragmentation? Are younger signers “cutting off” from older users? These questions underscore the importance of balancing vitality and continuity, innovation and mutual understanding within the community.

From a cultural standpoint, however, diversity should not be feared – on the contrary, it is a sign of linguistic strength and adaptability. Just as spoken languages have dialects, sociolects, and

slang, sign languages require space for creative development.

4. Culture as a Space of Inclusion or Exclusion

While many cultural institutions declare openness to Deaf audiences, the reality often falls short. Research indicates that:

- Sign language interpretation is occasional and often of low quality,
- There is a lack of active involvement of Deaf individuals in event design (curation, programming),
- Sign language is treated as an “add-on” rather than an integral part of the cultural experience.

This situation leads to what may be called “subtle cultural exclusion” a lack of visibility, underrepresentation, and consequently, marginalization. Respondents from Poland and France pointed out that even in modern institutions, there is no systematic approach to the presence of sign language – nor to the cultural agency of Deaf people.

Challenges and Successes

The implementation of the *Count me In* project revealed not only the richness of cultural and

linguistic practices related to sign language across Europe but also the complexity of the barriers both systemic and structural that Deaf individuals and cultural institutions aiming for inclusivity continue to face.

1. Challenges: Systemic, Methodological, Socio-Cultural

a. Uneven status of sign languages across Europe

One of the most significant challenges identified during the desk research phase was the stark imbalance in the legal and social status of sign languages in different countries. While in some states (e.g., Germany, Austria, Denmark), sign language is legally recognized and functions as a minority language with equal rights, in others (e.g., Cyprus) its status is marginal, symbolic, or entirely unregulated. This lack of a unified language policy impacts research possibilities, cultural accessibility, and the self-perception of sign language users as cultural creators.

b. Methodological difficulties in studying a living cultural language

The research team faced a unique challenge: how to describe a language that lacks a written form, has no unified corpus, and no long-standing tradition of codification? How to analyze sign language culture when much of it exists in

ephemeral spaces – gestures, bodies, glances, rhythms? In-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus groups (FGIs) yielded rich qualitative data but required heightened sensitivity from interpreters and moderators with regard to content, context, emotion, and power dynamics. Translating from sign to spoken language always carries the risk of losing meaning, tone, and nuance.

c. The tension between standardization and creativity

In many countries (e.g., France, Belgium, Poland), respondents expressed ambivalence about efforts to formalize and standardize sign language, particularly in the contexts of education or public policy. On one hand, there is a recognized need for a common language corpus that would facilitate intergenerational and regional communication. On the other, there is concern that institutionalized versions of SL may displace grassroots, culturally vibrant signing practices. This tension between “educational” and “artistic” language, “official” and “youth” varieties reflects a broader dilemma: how to preserve linguistic diversity and identity without descending into fragmentation.

d. Insufficient Deaf presence in cultural institutions

Both the research findings and partner experiences revealed that Deaf individuals are often invited to cultural institutions in symbolic or

incidental ways. Permanent programs, Deaf curatorial teams, signing educators, or long-term projects are lacking.

Institutions may declare openness but frequently lack the knowledge, tools, or collaborative structures to support real inclusion. Too often, they fail to ask the crucial question: what does inclusivity mean from a Deaf perspective?

2. Project Successes: Breakthroughs, Discoveries, Best Practices

a. Equal presence of sign language in the research process

One of the most important achievements of the project was the implementation of a *deaf-led, research-informed* approach. In many countries (e.g., Poland, Greece, Cyprus, Belgium), Deaf moderators, interpreters, and opinion leaders were part of the research teams. Their participation not only enhanced the understanding of data but also shifted the paradigm of sign language research from a paternalistic to a partnership model. Thus, the voices of Deaf individuals were not merely the “subject” of research, but its substance and method.

b. Revealing the cultural role of sign language

The project made it clear that sign language is not only a tool for communication but a space

of identity, creativity, and social agency. The research material included numerous examples: Deaf artists creating their own performative languages; youth using media-inspired slang in SL; and activists employing sign language as a tool of resistance.

This repositions sign language from a “supportive” category to a foundational element of European culture.

c. Documenting diverse local models

Thanks to local partnerships, it was possible to identify and describe good practices in combining culture and sign language. For instance, Denmark and Austria have art education programs for Deaf youth. In Germany and Lithuania, performances are staged with SL as the main language of dramaturgy. In Poland and Belgium, sign poetry festivals take place.

These examples constitute a knowledge base not only about the influence of culture on language but also about nurturing SL as a living, aesthetic, and political tool.

d. Building networks and trust

The project fostered the creation of an international collaboration network that extends beyond its formal scope. Shared conversations, workshops, translations, and audiovisual materials laid the groundwork for future initiatives, including those outside the cultural sector in education, social research, and inclusive policymaking.



Recommendations

Based on the findings of the *Count me In* project, expert analyses, and the experiences of partners and respondents from nine European countries, we formulated a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the presence of sign language in the cultural sphere and supporting its dynamic, creative development.

These recommendations pertain to three main areas: public policy, education and cultural institutions, and research and documentation of language practices.

1. Recommendations for policymakers and public authorities

a. Recognition of sign languages as cultural minority languages

We recommend that sign languages be regarded not only as communication tools for Deaf people but as full-fledged socio-cultural languages. This status should be reflected in both national and EU legislation, enabling:

- > the creation of dedicated budgets for supporting sign languages as cultural heritage,
- > institutional recognition of Deaf individuals as “carriers of language and culture”,
- > the development of protection and promotion programs for minority languages, with SL explicitly included.

b. Introduction of systemic regulations on the presence of SL in cultural life

Concrete legal and financial instruments are needed to ensure the consistent presence of sign language in cultural institutions such as:

- > public galleries and museums (e.g., sign language audiodescription, SL-guided tours),
- > libraries and theatres (e.g., signed performances, accessible collections),
- > festivals, concerts, public events (e.g., professional interpreters, campaigns in SL).

Note: interpretation should not be treated as an act of goodwill, but as a basic standard of linguistic accessibility.

2. Recommendations for cultural institutions, art schools, and educators

a. Inclusion of Deaf individuals in creative, curatorial, and expert roles

To move beyond treating Deaf people as “recipients with special needs”, they must be enabled to co-create culture at the levels of concept, programming, interpretation, and representation.

We recommend:

- > employing Deaf curators and educators in public institutions,

- supporting signing leaders in advocacy and expert roles,
- creating residency and scholarship programs for Deaf artists.

b. Creation of spaces for sign language as an artistic medium

Sign language does not have to function solely as a means of transmission it can be the very material of art. We recommend that institutions:

- support performative and visual projects where SL is the primary mode of expression,
- promote sign poetry, video art, and SL-based intermedia works,
- organize festivals, competitions, and publications featuring Deaf creators.

c. Inclusion of SL in communication and promotional strategies

Visual communications, promotional spots, websites – all should be designed with sign language in mind. We recommend:

- producing parallel versions of promotional materials in SL,
- running public awareness campaigns encouraging Deaf participation in culture,
- collaborating with signing influencers and content creators in communication efforts.

3. Recommendations for researchers, universities, and NGOs

a. Development of methodologies sensitive to sign language

It is essential to develop research approaches that consider the specificities of sign language as a visual-spatial language, and the participatory nature of Deaf culture. We recommend:

- expanding training programs for signing researchers,
- building sign language corpora that include cultural context,
- funding interdisciplinary projects at the intersection of linguistics, anthropology, and the arts.

b. Documentation and archiving of Deaf culture

There remains a lack of signing archives spaces that document artistic, educational, and activist activities of Deaf individuals. We recommend:

- establishing digital libraries and repositories of audiovisual SL materials,
- supporting Deaf documentarians and oral history researchers,
- publishing research findings and analyses in accessible formats and languages.

c. Promotion of transnational exchange and collaboration

The *Count me In* project demonstrated that sign

languages can serve as platforms for cross-border cooperation – even when they are not mutually intelligible. We recommend:

- building European networks of Deaf institutions and artists,
- supporting joint residencies, exchanges, and exhibitions,
- enhancing international interpreting capacity (e.g., between International Sign and national SLs).

Final Words

Sign language was not born out of lack. It is not a response to deficiency, nor a prosthesis of spoken language, nor a product of artificial necessity. It is a legitimate language of the world – a language of the body, of gaze, of space and rhythm. It records relationships not through sound, but through presence.

Written references to it exist as early as ancient Greek philosophy. In Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* (5th century BCE), Socrates wonders how people would communicate without voice or speech, and answers: "Would we not try to express ourselves with movements of the hands, the head, and the rest of the body, as the mute do today?" This observation is not merely philosophical; it stands as one of the earliest cultural recognitions of sign language as a natural and embodied form of linguistic expression.

From antiquity to the present day, and throughout the *Count me In* project research, we became convinced that sign language has served as a vehicle of culture, identity, and creativity.

Deaf communities are not passively waiting to be invited into culture – they are actively creating it, reinterpreting it, and expanding it on their own terms. Often in opposition to dominant systems of representation, often beyond institutional frameworks, but always – with a clear intention to be seen and heard, though not necessarily through sound.

This report – with its research, conversations, analyses, and examples – is not a closed whole. It is an open space: a record of current realities, but also an invitation to the future. It shows that sign language does not exist in isolation, but evolves in relation to culture, media, technology, politics, and education. That every aesthetic decision is also a decision about visibility and representation.

From a project perspective, we know that true inclusivity does not begin where culture "adapts" to Deaf individuals. It begins where it recognizes them as co-creators. Where institutions do not ask "do we have an interpreter?", but "is sign language one of the languages we offer?" Where people don't say "they" – but "we."

Let this report be the beginning of the next chapter. A chapter in which sign languages take their rightful place in the landscape of European culture – not as an add-on, but as one of the pillars of linguistic diversity and social imagination.

Because the future of culture is not only multilingual.

It is multimodal.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

CC BY-NC License – Rules and Terms of Use

<https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses/>



This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. CC BY-NC includes the following elements:

- BY: credit must be given to the creator.
- NC: only non-commercial uses of the work are permitted.



Co-funded by
the European Union

DK
Dobre Kadry
Centrum badawczo-szkoleniowe Sp. z o.o.

Larnaka
2030
EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE
CANDIDATE CITY

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΝΟΗΜΑΤΙΚΗΣ ΓΛΩΣΣΑΣ
Τέχνης Επικοινωνίας



AKADEMIA SZTUK PIĘKNYCH
IM. EUGENIUSZA GEPPERTA
WE WROCŁAWIU

Count me In (Increasing the participation of deaf people in the perception of culture)
Project Number – 101173224



Count me In

Creative Europe
Program 2024

