

Foreword{PRIVATE }

The report on Sign Language of the Netherlands was presented to the Dutch government in the persons of Ms Terpstra, Secretary of State for Health, Welfare and Sport, and Ms Netelenbos, Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science on June 11th, 1997. The full report *Meer dan een gebaar*¹ is at the present time only available in Dutch, hence this summary in English with purpose of informing the international community of our progress towards recognition of Sign Language of the Netherlands. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Eve Clark for her comments and Anna Bekius for her practical assistance in producing this summary. We are hopeful that the full report will eventually be published in translation.

The report was positively received by the two Secretaries of State in June. In September they will present their formal reaction to the Lower House with a subsequent debate on the content of the report in the course of the next few months. We hope that it will be clear by the end of the year how the recommendations are to be implemented.

Anne E. Baker (chair)
Amsterdam, September, 1997.

¹ The title of the report can not be directly translated into English since it means both "more than a sign" and "more than an empty gesture".

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Introduction

On March 14th 1996 the government committee on the Sign Language of the Netherlands was set up; their task was to advise on the implementation of official recognition of Sign Language of the Netherlands. Their task, as formulated by the government, was not so much directed at the question of whether Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) should be officially recognized, but above all at the question of how that recognition should be realized. Nevertheless the committee was of the opinion that it was sensible to motivate why SLN should be recognized. This question is dealt with in Part I: Starting point. Part II discusses three areas generally relevant to the question of recognition: the target group; the language itself, SLN; and the legal status of recognition. Although the committee was set up by the Secretary of State for Health, Welfare and Sport and the Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science, the report will not only deal with the areas for which the Secretaries of State are responsible: language and communication have a much broader relevance. In Part III the committee advises on eight specific areas for which the official recognition of SLN has particular implications. Part IV deals with the financial aspects and the implementation of the committee's recommendations.

The committee covered various disciplines and expertise. The chair was A. Baker (formerly Mills), professor of linguistics from the University of Amsterdam with research experience in SLN. The six members were A.C. Hendriks, a legal specialist from the Universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht with particular experience in human rights issues; H. Knoors, a linguist and education specialist from the Institute for the Deaf Sint Michielsgestel; G.J. van der Lem, a psychologist and director of the Foundation of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Child; W.J.M. Levelt, professor of psycholinguistics from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen; M. Schadee, lawyer and member of the deaf community and J.B. Wesemann, member of the European Union of the Deaf, director of the European Federation of the Deaf and chair of the European Forum for the Handicapped. J.P. Mackenbach represented the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, and C.A. Vreeburg the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The committee was supported in their activities by a professional advisory bureau, Smets & Hover.

As mentioned above, the committee had to gather information on wide range of topics since communication affects most aspects of daily life. For reasons of efficiency the committee organized its meetings in two work groups: one on language and education and the other on recognition and implications. After working in general terms for six months the committee organized three meetings in which the opinions of different individuals and institutions were heard. The committee also consulted on an individual basis various ministries and agencies as well as organizations for the deaf and potential users of SLN.

The regulations and solutions for the recognition of a sign language which have been created in some other countries were certainly an inspiration to the committee but it remains difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the various situations. The committee also took into account these experiences but it was not possible within the short time available to make a serious study of them.

Part I Starting point

Sign Language of the Netherlands as a sign language of the deaf is a natural language on a par with spoken languages. Research in both the Netherlands and abroad, on the structure of different sign languages in the world, has proven this point.

A sign language is completely accessible to a deaf child; a spoken language is not. A sign language is the only language which a deaf child can learn in a natural way. A sign language therefore needs to be regarded as the native language for the deaf child. Acquisition of a native language is absolutely essential for normal social-emotional and cognitive development. If a deaf person does not reach native mastery of a language - which is the case if SLN is not available to the person until later in life, this will have far reaching consequences for his/her social-cognitive competence. It is precisely this competence which is essential for self-confidence, for normal self-development, for education and employment and in the long term for human happiness. In the opinion of the committee, deaf people have a right to have access to SLN, albeit in the context of bilingualism (SLN and Dutch). Acquiring SLN as a native language is, as research has indicated, very favourable for learning Dutch.

The committee is well aware that deaf people have a functional handicap. This handicap is above all the result of the fact that deaf people must function in a society of hearing people. The handicap is most obvious and tangible in communications using spoken language. Recognizing SLN as an official language should in some ways reduce this handicap but cannot remove it completely.

In the conclusion to Part I the committee recommends to the government that SLN be recognized as an official language.

Part II Recognition of Sign Language of the Netherlands

The target group

Every person is free to use SLN but not every person who uses SLN has the same rights to the provision of SLN services such as sign interpreting. Deafness is difficult to define; the criterion which the committee recommends is that used by the family counselling services in the Netherlands, namely a hearing loss of 80dB. With regard to the use of SLN the committee distinguishes various sub-groups: those people with an early onset of deafness, those with a late onset, and the multiply-handicapped with a severe hearing loss. Furthermore there is a sub-group of hearing people who are directly involved in the care of deaf children and adults, that is parents and other family members, health workers, educationalists, etc. Using the data from a number of research reports, the committee presents their estimation of the numbers in each sub-group having rights to the provision of SLN services, so that the financial implications of their recommendations can be calculated.

The language SLN

SLN needs to be granted a clear role and status in education. For this purpose a certain degree of standardization of the language is necessary. SLN does not have dialects as such, but varieties. Variation exists above all in the relatively small basic vocabulary. The committee recommends that a gradual process of standardization be encouraged, above all by making SLN more visible, for example, in the media. A certain degree of standardization is essential for the development of educational materials. There needs to be agreement as to preferred forms in the basic vocabulary and in topic-specific vocabulary which as yet has to be determined. This requires lexicographic research and good documentation of existing SLN vocabulary. Recognition of SLN needs to be realized within the context of a bilingual policy. Dutch remains important for deaf people, above all, the reading and writing of Dutch are important in the opinion of the committee. The acquisition of SLN will have a positive effect here. In order to encourage integration of deaf and hearing people, society has the duty to ensure sufficient provision of written Dutch, for example in the media (in the form of subtitles), in museums, in public transport, and so on.

Bilingual input to the deaf child should begin as early as possible and should be rich and continuous. The committee envisages a national programme for family counselling services and special education in which a bilingual policy will be further developed and implemented. For this development a certain infrastructure is essential, namely the creation of a Lexicographic Institute and expansion of the existing Dutch Sign Centre². The deaf community needs to be involved and consulted in these developments.

Legal status

Recognition of SLN must have a firm legal status. The committee reviewed the possibilities, which vary from ministerial agreements to embedding in the Constitution. The committee's choice is to place recognition under the requirements of the European Covenant on Regional and Minority Languages, Part III³. The implications for the various aspects dealt with in the

² The Dutch Sign Centre has been in existence since 1992 and develops course materials for teaching SLN to various target groups. The centre is also co-ordinating projects on bilingual education and at the present time is financed by the schools for the deaf.

³ Only Frisian is recognized in the Netherlands under Part III of the Covenant.

report must be realized at least partly in the form of ministerial agreements. Since these agreements have a complex specific legal nature, the committee recommends that these agreements be worked out in the near future by a small committee of legal and administrative experts in which the various ministries are represented. The implementation of the other recommendations of this report should not be held up by this process.

Part III Implications for specific areas

In the eight areas which will be covered here the committee makes recommendations only about the use of SLN or Dutch. More general recommendations, for example on work provision for deaf people, fall outside the scope of this report.

Administration and law

In administration and law, the existing and future regulations governing legal interpreters need to explicitly mention sign interpreters. In developing a quality control policy for this group, sign interpreters also need to be considered.

Culture

In the formal recognition of SLN it needs to be made explicit that recognition also includes cultural activities in the language. In the context of a general political responsibility for SLN, the government should make it financially possible for a policy that will encourage artistic productions in SLN. Proposals should also be developed to make museums and cultural activities more accessible to deaf people. Such improvements will also be beneficial to the hard-of-hearing.

Media

The government must also guarantee that, in the media, public and commercial broadcasting companies will provide sub-titles for as many programmes as possible and also come to an agreement on the use of sign interpreters. A priority in programme planning needs to be given to a weekly television programme for deaf people on and in SLN and on deaf culture.

Employment

Deaf people must be able to participate on an equal basis in the job market. Within that context, they have the right to a sign interpreter in all job situations from seeking employment at one end of the scale to dismissal and re-organization at the other. This implies a considerable increase in the number of interpreting hours available. In granting sign interpreting, the number of hours must be related to the amount of communication with hearing people the job requires. Financing of the interpreting costs should be embedded in the future Reintegration Law.

Health and social services

SLN should be used in helping deaf clients in general health care, mental health and social services. This implies that the most important information must also be made available in SLN on video and that SLN must also be used in direct contact with care-givers. This must be achieved either through the use of an interpreter covered by the health insurance⁴ or through the use of care-givers with a good knowledge of SLN. The committee is of the opinion that the recognition of SLN and a carefully implemented bilingual policy will lead to a reduction in the large number of psycho-social problems in deaf people.

⁴ The general law for provision of special health costs or AWBZ covers sign interpreting. All sign interpreters costs fall at the moment under this regulation with the exception of interpreting in criminal law.

Family counselling services

In order to ensure an early and continuous provision of SLN to the deaf child, family counselling services need to be able to offer a long period of support to parents and other family members. At the present time, family counselling services help the parents of deaf children up to the age of five years. For the parents of children who become deaf after age three, the period of support needs to be extended to seven years of age. Furthermore it is important that parents continue to develop proficiency in SLN beyond the period in which they receive support from the family counselling services so that they have optimal communication with their child. In order to guarantee continuity in the provision of SLN instruction, it is advisable that family counselling services be able to continue to provide language instruction to parents with financial coverage via health insurance⁴. For all these activities the Dutch Sign Centre must develop a spectrum of instruction from general group courses to self-instruction using video and CD-ROM.

Education

Given the importance of the early provision of bilingual education, children with early deafness need to be able to have schooling in kindergarten and middle school in primary education⁵ within the context of special education. Secondary education (from age twelve) should be within the regular schools wherever possible. The sign interpreter provision needs to be tailored to meet this need; integrated pupils should also have the possibility of returning to the special setting for certain activities. The committee is of the opinion that the planned changes in policy which will restructure special education⁶ offer good possibilities for the provision of good educational services to the deaf pupil in both primary and secondary education. In implementing this policy, advice in the form of packages of care, counselling and education, need to be worked out in collaboration with parent organizations and the educational services for the deaf.

In these developments it must not be forgotten that SLN is the native language of the deaf. The use of sign interpreters in an integrated setting must not be paid for out of the individual child's budget. In-service training should be developed for the teachers of one or more deaf pupils in this setting. The didactic principle in deaf education is bilingualism. Since SLN is the native language of deaf children, it must be the primary language of instruction, that is the language in which all specific subjects are taught. Furthermore SLN must have the status in the educational programme of a subject in itself. An intensive in-service-training programme for the employees of the deaf schools needs to be developed and implemented. Teaching plans and methods need to be speedily developed. The Dutch Sign Centre should play an important part here. Integration in secondary education usually requires the use of a sign interpreter and the deaf pupil has a right to such interpreting in this context. A method for determining the number of interpreter hours needed has to be developed. The organizations

⁵ Dutch primary education is split into three periods: groups 1 and 2 from 4 years to 5 years (kindergarten); groups 3, 4 and 5 from 6 years to 8 years (middle school) and groups 6, 7 and 8 from 9 years to 12 (upper school).

⁶ This policy for special education has the name 'Rucksack' and was published in 1996 by the Ministry Education, Culture and Science in 1996. In this policy a pupil with a handicap will be provided with an individual financial budget (the rucksack). Parents have the right to choose the school for their child and the provisions that the child should receive.

for the deaf and the Council for the Handicapped need to be consulted in this matter. In accordance with the current regulations for public examinations, the possibility of having oral examinations using a sign interpreter must be created.

Higher education poses special problems for the deaf student. Here too a sign interpreter is essential. Applications for interpreting hours should not be submitted to a lengthy screening procedure; the current criterion that education should clearly and directly lead to employment should not be used. Alongside the interpreter the student should also be able to make use of a notetaker. If the deaf student needs to move from one type of higher education to another or to follow several courses (often necessary for the deaf student in order to arrive at the desired level), sign interpreting should be granted for all parts. Institutions of higher education should formulate, preferably at a national level, regulations which specify the type of support a handicapped student can receive. In these regulations students with a hearing impairment should be specifically mentioned.

Scientific research into SLN is both desirable and necessary as part of the infrastructure. A chair for SLN needs to be created within a department of General Linguistics. A research programme for SLN should be started in the context of the National Research Institute of Linguistics (LOT)⁷. Within the areas of social sciences and education science research needs also to be stimulated on SLN and deaf culture.

Deaf students in adult education also have a right to a sign interpreter. In the programmes for basic education deaf teachers should be employed to teach deaf students.

Deaf people who became deaf later in life and wish to learn SLN should be able to make use of courses (as yet to be developed); such courses should be offered by the social services for the deaf.

Since special education desperately needs more deaf teachers, the committee recommends that one or two educational training colleges should receive funding for better provision for deaf trainee teachers. This can be done within the normal context of the teacher training programmes using the regulations for social provision and the non-compulsory part of the planned programme.

Private life

Finally it is essential that the number of sign interpreting hours granted for private life should be substantially increased. The procedures for applying for and granting these hours should be made less complex and faster. Applicants dealing with different organizations need to be treated in the same way, from a legal point of view.

⁷ University research in the Netherlands is organized in research institutes collecting together research groups in one or more universities. LOT is one of the largest research schools for linguistics.

Part IV Implementation and funding

In this section of the report, the committee estimates as far as possible what the financial implications of their recommendations are. This is not possible in all cases. It is also important to realize that in some areas investment must take place before any return on this investment can be expected. Lastly the committee wishes to emphasize that developments in assistive technology can help reduce costs in the coming years.

The table below gives a summary of the most important costs (in Dutch guilders).

Infrastructure

- Dutch Sign Centre	yearly, permanent	1	million
- Lexicographic Institute	yearly, permanent	0.75	million
- chair for SLN	yearly	0.15	million

Culture and media

- artistic events in SLN (promotional funding)	temporary	not yet specified	
- increase in sub-titles (allowing for abolishing exemption from payment of television and radio licenses)	permanent	budget neutral	

Family counselling services and Health

The committee considers the current budgets sufficient to cover costs here.

Education

- implementation of teaching programme SLN	yearly for 4 years	0.5	million
- in-service-training employees (implies doubling the current budget)	yearly for 3 years	not yet specified	

Interpreting services

- current provision (a 500% increase can be financed within current budget)	yearly, permanent	20	million
- expansion around 2010	yearly, permanent	20	million extra

The implementation of the committee's recommendations is planned in three phases. The main activities in each phase are indicated in the following table.

Phases	Period	Main activity
1	1997 - 2003	Formal recognition Creation of infrastructure Projects for bilingual education Evaluation
2	2003 - 2010	Expansion of interpreter services Consolidation of infrastructure Consolidation of educational provision Exploration of the possibilities of assistive technology
3	2010 -	Specification of the target amount for sign interpreting provision

The main investment for the expansion of the sign interpreting service is not needed until the second phase of implementation: the present budget can cover the costs in the first phase. The first phase has to cover the costs of introducing the education programme in SLN, the in-service-training of teachers and the infrastructure. The committee estimates that an investment of 5 million guilders in the first year (1997) will provide a good start, in particular for the infrastructure and introduction of SLN in schools.

The committee recommends that a ministerial official be appointed with the responsibility of co-ordinating and integrating the various developments and projects that result from the recognition of SLN.

The report contains a number of appendices that give further information on the activities of the committee and background information.

This report carries the status of an advisory document to the government. The government itself is responsible for the way in which it implements any recommendations made here. The committee is optimistic that the government and parliament will be able to accept their recommendations as sensible and well motivated.

If the government is prepared to bear the financial consequences, an important step forward will have been taken for the welfare of deaf people in our society.