

## **SIGN LANGUAGE : MYTH OR REALITY**

The history of the education of the deaf or rather of the deaf mute has always been object of strong controversy but in particular for the use of its methods. Many such 'resolatory' methods as such have been invented or proposed . Among such methods is the most 'ferocious' contrast of all because of its diverse educative, linguistic, cultural and social implications that is that between the oral method and the so called and which we shall define as mimical sign language.

In this assignment we don't want to enter into the merits of linguistic issues. We only want to verify whether the LIS (Italian sign language) has the same potential on the level of comprehension and expression of the spoken language and whether as sustained by T. Russo Cardona and V. Volterra it is capable of directing rich and complex contents as is the oral language.

We have no desire of being omnipotent, we comprehend that a total research is extremely complicated and we are thus awaiting with much interest and curiosity the results of the above mentioned research conducted by the university of Pisa, we have only presented a 'photograph' and we shall leave to others a more in depth study. Surely considering the complexity of such a theme, anyone can easily say that it would have been better, that we could have, that we should that it is necessary to, etc. We are well aware of this. But considering the low number of subjects taken for the research we had to make decisions relying on our possibilities.

We begin from a difficult conviction which is to contrast and acritically accept by others ,that if the LIS is a language to all effect as is the Italian or French language then it must have the same potentiality. In this regard we have found many affirmations on this principle in bibliography but nothing on the verification of 'equal potentiality'. Are we certain that no research has been conducted? For example many years ago a university student of mine (Of which I don't recall anything else: too many years have gone by) wrote a thesis on the comprehension of the news broadcast in sign language conducted by deaf signers. This person probably aspired to some other study. Unfortunately I don't remember.

Our convictions are more precise (Gitti G. 2008) but we won't go into that. We will simply demonstrate the mode and the results of the research, without reaching any conclusion in the hope that regardless of the results, what will emerge will be the opportunity to discuss the two dogma which obviously cannot both be true: For some the Lis is a language to all effect and for others it remains a mimical gestural language.

We will not pause to describe the prerogatives of the LIS: we would surely in doing so present a bad copy of some great book or article. We want to show that objectively there are many books and articles on the LIS but that they are also a repetition of W: Stokoe's famous work "Sign language structure: an outline of the visual communication system of the American deaf" (1960) and that all such research and its conclusions have never taken into consideration the gradation of deafness, its type or the onset of deafness and above all the situation concerning the 'real' bilingualism or the 'real' monolingualism which are fundamental for the valuation of the 'real' potential of the LIS.

### **THE RESEARCH**

It is stated that the language (oral) is the most complex phenomenon that exists and hence its measurement is absolutely difficult if not objectively impossible. The variables either concerning the comprehension or the expression are so many and so linked with each other that it is truly difficult to effectively certify, beyond words or signs what a person has understood or has said. Obviously the situation becomes furthermore complicated the instant in which one tries to measure the comprehension using a different language which 'reflects' a different culture. We have furthermore come across ulterior difficulty in this research when trying to find bilingual subjects and that is to say subjects who from birth have the capability to express themselves in equal manner in both languages. This is due to the fact that the LIS is particularly objective for many reasons. In this examination we will cite three cases which we cannot but agree upon:

1 - Over 90 % of parents of deaf children are hearing and they don't know the LIS

2 - The LIS ( Italian sign language)is an abstraction in that a standard language used by all doesn't exist but where each 'group' has its own variation, even different within the same city or in the same institute.

3 - with the integration of the deaf in public schools, the 'special schools' or Institutes for the deaf have practically 'disappeared ' the same institutes which according to Mottez are the only 'true islands' where one can learn the LIS.

In regards to the interpreter, we have entrusted in an expert in possession of a regular technical degree and an interpreter of the Italian sign language.

The search for bilingual subjects was problematic for various reasons. Considering that in the last 35 years deaf children have integrated in mainstream schools only a very few and probably only children of deaf mute parents know the LIS from birth and a few have learned it in adulthood. We cannot but add that some deaf bilingual subjects have rejected to undergo such a research that according to them may 'hide' some hostile motivation in reference to the LIS which in the end they believe will be evaluated negatively.

## **THE SAMPLE**

Despite our research and our vast knowledge of the 'world' of the deaf, we were only able to find four bilingual subjects willing to collaborate (Tab.1). Of these one used the LIS from birth, while the other three began to sign much later in life, but who for many years have used both languages. To all these subjects useful information was previously asked referring to their age, title of study, profession, hearing or deaf, a relative of a deaf person, child of a deaf mute person, use of the two languages and the age in which they began to use the LIS.

## **INTERPRETER OR TRANSLATOR**

An interpreter is an oral mediator who utilizes forms and expressions of the 'other' person simultaneously and in doing so permits a comprehension between the two speakers. On the other hand a translator makes a translation, however possible of a written text. The interpreter creates the condition for two people of different languages to 'understand 'each other. The translator not only has to maintain the significance without changing it but also the complete text.

## **THE MATERIAL**

Each subject was put through a test with diverse difficulty. There were 5 tests:

- 1 - a list of 56 synonyms
- 2 - An article taken from [www.dueparole.it](http://www.dueparole.it) by T. De Mauro which is for people in need of readable and comprehensive information,
- 3 - A third form literary comprehension entry test MT (1995) by C: Cornoldi et al.,
- 4 - An extract from Platone's "Fedro"
- 5 - A piece of news in LIS from the TG1 of 7.30 broadcast on 9/07/07

All of these tests except for the last obviously, were translated in LIS by the interpreter and video recorded. These tests were not at all modified and they were given to the subjects having first covered the interpreter's mouth with a band to evaluate the results firstly without the use of lip reading and successively with the aid of lip reading. There are many disagreements among authors concerning the use of lip reading. They all agree that facial mime is an integral part of the LIS but not all agree on its validity or its correct use. Some even go as far as sustaining that it is negative for comprehension.

Objectively if the LIS has all the proprieties of an oral language then it doesn't make sense that it can gain advantage from lip reading and moreover the LIS is also used by people who do not know the oral language in which case lip reading could prove an element of disturbance because it would

be 'lip signing' without significance.

Subject	A	B	C	D
age	50	36	33	61
title of study	Book keeping	Book keeping	Book keeping	Graduated
Profession	work counselor	multipurpose executor	shop assistant	teacher
Hearing / deaf	Hearing	Deaf	Deaf	Hearing
Husband/wife/partner of deaf	no	yes	yes	no
Child of deaf	yes	no	-	no
Habitually uses the two Languages	yes	yes	yes	yes
Age in which began to sign	0	19	20	12

Tab. 1

Let's continue with the display of the tests.

Test n.: Synonyms

Test n.2 - Some advice for grocery shopping. Before going shopping it is useful to write a list of all the things necessary to buy. In this way we will avoid to forget essential things and avoid buying futile things.

Test n.3 - The deterioration of the environment.

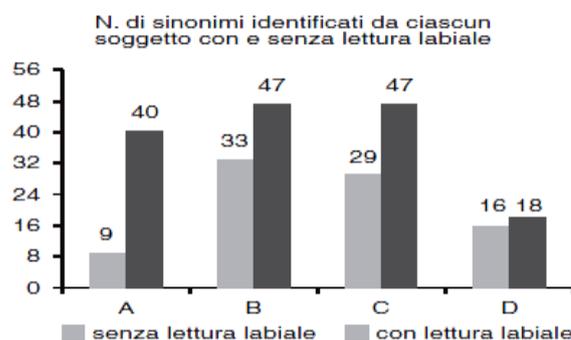
The damage done to the food production constitutes the more immediate ecological consequence of the expansion of agricultural activity, but it is not the only consequence.

Test n.4 - The alphabet generates oblivion among the souls of who learn it: They will cease to exercise their memory because confiding in the writing they will stop recalling things from their inner self but will recall things from the outside utilizing strange signs. That is you haven't discovered an answer for memory training but only a recalling things to the mind.

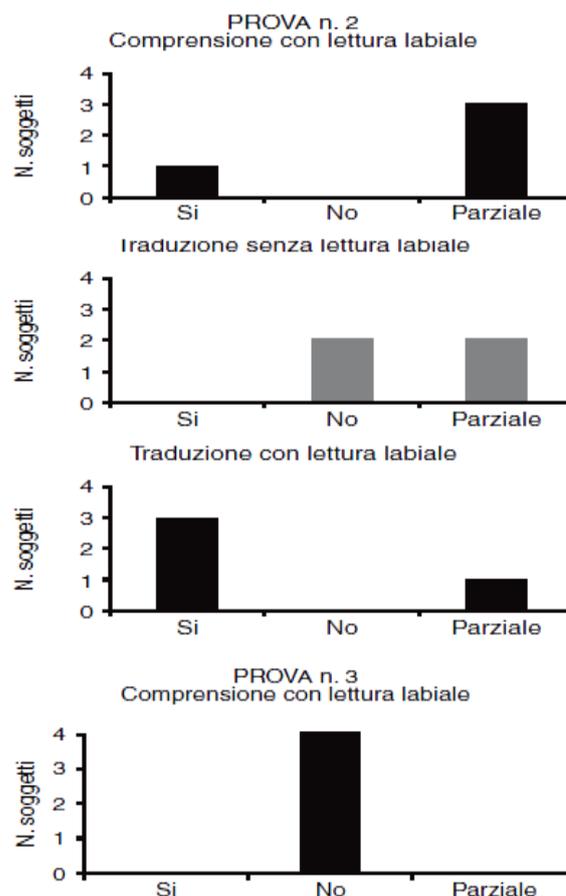
Test n. 5 - Ferrari on top after the Raikkonen's triumph at the Silverstone Grand Prix in England. The finish repeats the Magny-Cours success and he does it in the McLaren household. For Louis Hamilton an error during the pit stop was in fact decisive. Massa, the other Ferrari driver came fifth after a fantastic comeback.

## THE MODALITY OF THE TEST PRESENTATIONS

In the test n. 1, the subjects have to translate into LIS in Italian the synonyms first without lip reading and then with lip reading, writing them on the supplied board.



Tab. 2 - Percentuale di sinonimi identificati dai singoli soggetti con e senza lettura labiale



In the tests n. 2-3-4-5, The subjects were asked three tasks:

To write what they had understood after having seen the film clip only once;

– To carry out the translation first without and then with the use of lip reading and with the possibility to see the film clip however times required.

## RESULTS

As we already mentioned the results were empirically valuated and therefore debatable. However experience is so simple that anyone can repeat it and personally valuate the results. All the same to give the evaluation an objective outlook we went ahead with the following modality:

1 - The synonyms were scored correct if they were present in the 'synonym and opposites' dictionary. By G. Pittàno Ed. Zanichelli 2006

2 - In regards to the translations we formed a 'group of valuation' conducted by three people each one giving their judgment (yes, no, partial). The majority response was counted as valid. In the few cases where there wasn't a unanimous or a majority response then the case was set to discussion and finally agreed upon.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results are objectively surprising:

1 - The subjects correctly translated 21.75% of synonyms without the use of lip reading and 38% with lip reading which in fact seems to have a very significant role considering the 16.25% increase. It is interesting to note that the synonyms correctly translated were not the same for everyone: only 4 synonyms, without lip reading and 16 with lip reading were translated by all the subjects.

2 - In the tests (3,4,5) No results were given in either comprehension or translation with or without the aid of lip reading.

**3 - The average comprehension level of all the other tests with lip reading occurred in 6,25 % of cases, nothing in 50% and a partial result in 43,75%.**

4 - The average result in all the other tests without use of lip reading was nil in 81% of cases and a partial result in 18,75%.

5 - The average result in translation with the aid of lip reading was correct in 18,75 % of cases, nil in 68,75% and partial in 12,5%.

It can thus be confirmed that lip reading for bilingual subjects is not decisive and its only important role is for means of translation and comprehension but only if the topic of discussion is recognized. Considering the 'numbers' of subjects, it is obvious that we cannot and don't want to reach any conclusion. We believe however that the results confirm what is written by C. Cantagalli and E. Cimino (2000; 282-283). . "[...] As a work hypothesis we may ask ourselves whether or not it is true that with sign language one can express anything, that is any discussion from the more complicated theoretical elaboration or exposition or the illustration of particularly complex research implying its complex technical use, in natural or human sciences, to narrative or poetic work and [...] on a lexicography level notwithstanding the profuse commitment on behalf of the experts in the production of dictionaries, [...] we may ask ourselves if all these points are sufficient for expression even more than what occurs in our everyday life".

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