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Engaging Theory and Action

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Can an Equality of Condition for Signed Languages Advance Equality for Deaf Communities?

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I WOULD TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO THANK SALT LAKE COMMUNITY College for sponsoring this presentation and as well, to the rest of you for attending this presentation which takes on this Saturday morning. I appreciate you for giving up a Saturday morning for this presentation; perhaps normally on Saturday mornings you lie in, or do essential shopping or taking kids to the park so on. As well, I also thank you for your patience and cooperation regarding my productive skills in American Sign Language (ASL). I am sure you would notice that my signing would be kind of pidgin style, switching between ASL and Irish Sign Language (ISL) which is my native language. Alphabetical handshapes are noticeably different between ASL and ISL and I am sure that you are not here to analyse my signing skills. The most important part is the message of my presentation and I hope to have adequate time to discuss the issues arising from the presentation at a later stage.

Let me explain the convention regarding the term signed language used in the title of this presentation: languages are generally equated with what is spoken or written. In colloquial terms, people often refer to languages in terms of 'spoken and/or written languages.' 'Sign is not included in the presumed list of language attributes.

There is an implicit assumption that when a language is signed that it is a compensatory tool. Signed languages are not compensatory tools, but they are the indigenous languages of Deaf people. Since it is commonly known that behind every culture, there is an aligned language[1], I feel it is important to raise the status of signed languages and the profile of Deaf culture.

Allow me to introduce some personal information and background, which will set the tone of this presentation. I have successfully passed my viva voce (defense) last January and expect to be graduated later this month. My doctoral research focuses on the comparative analysis of language policies' effects on signed languages in Finland and Ireland (from an egalitarian perspective). Finland is chosen because it is often protrayed as the model country for other countries to follow or aspire towards in terms of service provisions and the status of signed languages. So it is ideal to have Finland included in the research and have its policies and procedures analysed then have them compared to the Irish situation. Snippets and commentaries from this research are included in this presentation.

In order to set the tone of this presentation, I would like to use Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who suggests that there are three methods by which we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. I believe this conference gives an opportunity to reflect on the status of signed languages on a global basis and see how they fare in light of recent successful campaigns to have them recognised on a legal basis. Though I can assume that most of those present at this conference have had bitter experiences seeing ASL being ridiculed or unfavourably treated.

STRUCTURE OF THIS PRESENTATION

The structure of this presentation is to focus on the current status of signed languages and critique their status. This part examines the current status and applies a critique of their statuses based on whether they advance the equality for Deaf communities. Once their statuses are determined, we can apply an equality framework to the status of signed languages. This framework assists us in understanding the concept of equality and how it can be applied to determine the level of equality of the statuses of signed languages. The final part of this presentation is to argue how equality of condition can advance equality for signed languages

SIGNED LANGUAGES AS A BASIS FOR EQUALITY

For many Deaf communities, including the Irish Deaf community, the status of signed languages is intricately linked to their socio-economic status in wider society (see World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), www.wfdeaf.org; European Union of the Deaf (EUD), www.eudeaf.org, Irish Deaf Society (IDS), www.deaf.ie). Current policies affecting the status of signed languages vary from one country to another country. Some countries manage

to achieve higher legal status for their indigenous sign language[2] and other countries do not accord any status to their indigenous sign languages. However, the bestowal of higher legal status alone does not necessarily bring substantive equality to the Deaf communities (WFD, 2009; Timmermans, 2005). Many commentators, chiefly from the Deaf Studies perspective, point out that the granting of legal status to signed languages often fails due to the language policy orientation adopted. They suggest that even more advanced countries are informed by the social model of deafness which does not take full account of the unique linguistic and cultural experiences of Deaf people as its primary focus is on compensation for 'impairment' (Lane, et al., 1996; Ladd, 2003; Lane, 2005; Batterbury, et al., 2007; Bauman, 2008; Emery, 2009).

For Deaf communities worldwide, their indigenous signed languages and their cultures are the mainstay of their communities (Lane 2005; Ladd 2003). It would be a huge mistake to treat signed languages as an entity that can be replaced or substituted by spoken languages. Signed languages are often the source of innate experiences and they develop a sense of belonging for many Deaf people (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Ladd, 2003; Batterbury, et al., 2007). Deaf people can acquire spoken languages through artificial or rehabilitative means. However, spoken languages are not the native or first[3] languages of Deaf people and they cannot attain the same proficiency in them as they would through signed language as is exemplified by several investigations of Deaf communities (Jones & Pullen, 1987; Kyle & Allsop, 1997; EUD, 2001; Conama & Grehan, 2001; Conroy, 2006)[4]. Hence, signed languages are often the only natural means for most Deaf people to express their views articulately. A Dutch governmental committee on the recognition of Dutch Sign Language stated that signed languages are the only languages that can be naturally acquired by Deaf people (Baker 2000), and that Deaf children should be provided with sufficient exposure to this language[5] (Jokinen, 2000).

Signed languages are languages in their own right, on a par with spoken languages (Meier, et al., 2002). However, signed languages should not be regarded solely as a communication medium. Rubio-Marin (2003) states that languages' intimate relationships with cultures are widely recognised, hence languages are means of communication, but are not culturally neutral. He also points out that several linguistic minorities have sought protection of their indigenous languages to protect or preserve their cultures from assimilation (Rubio-Marin, 2003; 57). This is also true for the Deaf communities (Ladd, 2003).

However, in historical terms, the destiny of signed languages is never a happy one and they are subjected to eradication, degradation, or dismissal (see Lane, 1984; Fischer & Lane, 1993[6]). The Milan Congress of 1880 is often

regarded as a landmark event in the Deaf heritage as it approved a series of resolutions banishing signed languages from the classrooms in the schools for the Deaf. This congress was by no means an isolated incident, however; it was part of a long process of degrading the status of signed languages. (Lane, 1993: Fischer & Lane, 1993)

Therefore, for many Deaf communities, the attempt to remove or degrade the status of signed languages is a political issue. For Branson and Miller (1997), little or no access to signed languages could be regarded as preventing one from reaching full humanity. For Jokinen (2000), this is a serious human right issue. Hence, these views can be exemplified by the resolution passed at the Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf which calls on each of its' national association members to ensure their signed languages receive national recognition. The resolution was passed in Tokyo in 1991 (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994: 408-411). The European Union of the Deaf was behind two resolutions in the European Parliament calling on member states to implement the official recognition of indigenous sign languages in 1988 and 1998. As a result, several countries have recognised the status of indigenous sign languages constitutionally and Finland is one of them. Other countries adopt a legislative approach and Sweden is the best example in this regard. It has given legislative recognition to Swedish Sign Language in the education legislation (Krausanker 2000, Timmermans 2005, World Federation of the Deaf, www.wfdeaf.org, accessed January 2009).

Though some countries managed to get signed languages recognised in their respective legislatures, the efficiency and effectiveness of having signed languages recognised vary from one country to the next (Krausanker, 2000, Timmermans, 2005). The benefits of having signed languages legally recognised are often undermined for Deaf people by the failure of countries to place signed languages on a par with spoken languages. The current president of the World Federation of the Deaf, Markku Jokinen reminded the meeting of the United Nations Forum on Minorities in December 2008:

> Deaf people face exactly the same problems that have been discussed today and yesterday during this forum, as hearing linguistic and cultural minorities. Themes mentioned in the draft recommendations on minorities and the right to education applies to us also. Sign language users' linguistic rights which entail the right to use their own language are not carried out and in fact sign language users suffer linguistic genocide every day (Markku Jokinen, President of the World Federation of the Deaf, wfdeaf.org, accessed January 2009).

Jokinen's reminder implies that outsiders do not see indigenous sign languages as languages in their own right like spoken languages. Therefore, the exclusion, whether intentionally or unintentionally, has a number of consequences. One of them is the exclusion of signed languages from the

aegis of formal language policies at any level ranging from the local to the international. Instead, signed languages are often dealt with under the aegis of disability policies or procedures. In effect, signed languages are often not regarded as equal to the national or other spoken minority languages.

Because of this conference, out of curiosity, I checked the website of your national Deaf-led national organisation, The National Association of the Deaf (http://www.nad.org; accessed April 2010). According to this website, one of legal values promoted by this organisation is to have linguistic rights regarding the status of American Sign Language preserved, protected, and promoted. It is also interesting to note that the priorities set by the members of this organisation. Priorities such as the federal recognition of ASL and the ASL as a Deaf child's human right are ranked as 4th and 5th in this regard. The closed captioning in the cinemas and the insufficient number of Deaf interpreters across the nation are prioritised above these former priorities. Granted, I have not attempted to analyse the reasons behind these priorities, it does provide a startling reading for outsiders.

With this in mind, I encourage others to check and compare the contents of the websites hosted by Deaf-led organisations such as the Irish Deaf Society (http://www.deaf.ie) and the British Deaf Association (the Sign Community; http://www.bda.org.uk.) It is noticeable that both organisations prioritise the status of signed languages over other priorities.

LANGUAGE POLICY

Though many commentators agree it is impossible to theorise about language policy in general, this section proposes to set the parameters of language policy for this presentation. There is a common fallacy that policies are synonymous with written rules or regulations; therefore, language policies are often regarded in a similar line: they are assumed to exist only if written down. However, policies can exist by omission or by existing implicitly if not explicitly. Hill (2005) describes the additional myths:

- The belief that a policy is based on a given decision
- No action or status quo implies that there is no policy
- Policies are only related to decisions rather than actions

Hill (2005) notes that there is a widespread tendency to believe that there is no policy in operation if there is no action involved. For example, if the status quo situation continues, and issues are not formally recognised for policy purposes, it is assumed that there must be no policy at all. He points out that continuing the status quo situation, or deciding no action is required to deal with issues, is the important part of the power dynamics behind the pol-

icy process; it is policy-by-default.

Another myth is the belief that to have policies, they must be based solely on decisions rather than actions. However, as Hill (2005) points out actions can be taken without policy decisions. There are, for example no policies stating that Deaf people or people from outside of Ireland cannot become primary teachers in Ireland; however, the practice of requiring people to be proficient in the Irish language (Gaeilge) means that there is a policy by default. Other commentators such as Lukes, (1974) and Dahl (1971) point out that policies can be shaped by several factors such as a decision-making network and power relationships.

Given the complexity of defining 'policy,' it is further complicated when it is applied to language. The concept of language policy is often popularly perceived as limited to the policymakers deciding or reinforcing which language(s) are to be used. This fails to recognise that there are a number of factors besides the policymakers influencing the directions of language policies. Policies can be identified through explicit statements (clauses on the constitutions or legislations), implicit statements (the right to stand before the courts equally and the right to be heard etc), dominant ideologies (the more people think alike, the dominant view becomes 'truth") and finally, personal preferences (accents, agreed rules on elocution etc., popular attitudes towards languages) (Spolsky, 2004).

CRITIQUE

According to the World Federation of the Deaf (http://www.wfdeaf.org; accessed April 2010), there are 41 national signed languages gained legal/ official recognition. The recognition comes in various forms. According to the WFD, nine countries bestowed constitutional status on national signed languages and twenty-nine countries[8] included signed lagnauges in their legislations or national policies. Additional three national governments gave their recognition to the respective signed languages.

Are these statuses sufficient to advance equality? This question depends on the understanding of the concept of equality and how it can be measured. The concept of equality needs to be understood before agreeing on the possible means of measuring it in societies. Nevertheless, allow us to use the general sense of equality for now. Let us go though the selected examples of how much (or little) equality had been advanced as a result of these bestowals.

Despite the legal status bestowed on these signed languages, it is unfortunate that equality remains exclusive for those who sought it as the desired outcome of their campaigns. Despite this, it has to be said that the bestowed

statuses of signed languages had brought upon a great collective sense of pride among Deaf communities and such bestowal have boosted collective confidence within the Deaf communities.

Legally, signed language users are no better than in previous situations as the recognition has not brought significant changes to the status of users. They are still viewed as citizens of the states which dominant spoken languages remain the mainstay of linguistic rights. Protection and promotion of signed languages are often not sufficiently extended to ensure legislative rights for their users. There are a number of obvious general examples:

• Education-wise, signed language users' rights are still expendable and their rights are often playing a poor relation to the rights of spoken language users. No country to date has the educational instruction in signed languages compulsory for Deaf children. For all countries that had bestowed the legal/official status on signed languages, the choice for using signed languages in education remains optional at the discretion of parents of Deaf children or educational authorities.

• The socio-economic status of Deaf people appears static though there are individual successes as several academic journals attest. My research shows a similar situation for both Irish and Finnish Deaf people (Conama, 2010).

• Constitutional recognitions are often influenced by disability framework rather than having signed languages recognised in their own right (for example: Finland, 1995). Contrary to a popular perception, technically, the Finnish Sign Language is not explicitly recognised by the state constitution. The following wording translated into English by the Ministry of Justice is:

The Sami, as an indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Provisions on the right of the Sami to use the Sami language before the authorities are laid down by an Act. The rights of persons using sign language and of persons in need of interpretation or translation owing to disability shall be guaranteed by an Act. (Section 17 of the Constitution of Finland, Ministry of Justice; http://www.om.fi/21910.htm, accessed November 2007).

However, it has to be emphasised that the ministry regards the English translation as 'unofficial' but a communication from the Finnish embassy states that the translation looked correct.[9] Given the translation is deemed as acceptable, it is clear that the Finnish Sign Language itself is not recognised as this clause does grant direct personal rights to persons using sign language or requiring interpreting services. The given right is based on a medical perspective. The distinction would bring different consequences if one focuses on the

rights of persons using a language instead of the language itself.

- Although New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) is legally recognised, it is regarded as unfavourable when its status is compared to the status of Maori languages (Reffell and McKee 2009). The responsibility for drafting a bill to recognise the status of NZSL falls to the Office for Disability Issues and the Minister for Disability Issues (see http://www.odi.govt.nz/nzsl-video/2004-nzsl-bill-video-index.html). The Office for Disability Office retains the responsibility for monitoring the status of NZSL (see http://www.odi.govt.nz/what-we-do/nzsl/2010-review-nzsl-act.html).

- Regarding the recent BSL recognition by London, a British linguist describes this recognition 'toothless' by stating: "Nevertheless, to date there has been no parliamentary recognition of BSL as an official language and thus no far-reaching phase of sign-language policy implementation in conjunction with the Deaf community. All that has been offered — via an announcement made on March 18, 2003 indicating that the government now acknowledges that BSL is indeed a language — is a toothless form of recognition that is not backed by any change in BSL's legal status" (Turner, 2004).

- Even within the Swedish medical situations, the status of Swedish Sign Language is respected and parents of Deaf children are actively encouraged to avail of Swedish Sign Language (Priesler, 2001; Blume 2005; Moores, 2005). While this is much welcomed, on a closer inspection the rationale for this reason appears, Swedish Sign Language is implicitly treated as insurance for CI children, just in case if the cochlear implantation might not work for these children.

- Even so, linguistic rights are not always given under disability legislations in USA, Canada and Australia. Snoddon (2009) examines disability legislation in Canada, the US and Australia in the context of whether they give recognition to signed language rights. On the findings of her research, she suggests that while these disability legislations view Deaf students as disabled, the ineffectiveness of these legislations to realise the language rights for these students is noted. She suggests: "Of all the strategies for educational reform and improvement that have been tried by Deaf communities and associations of Deaf people around the world, the legal approach may be the last frontier. Native signed languages are in need of attitude, status, corpus, and acquisition planning" (Snoddon, 2009; 268).

- In Ireland, there are equality legislations, which prohibit discrimination against persons on nine grounds. One of the grounds is disability and Deaf persons cannot avail of this ground to get linguistic

rights unless access to signed language is regarded as a tool of reasonable accommodation. Reasonable accommodation is accompanied by the principle of 'nominal cost' to the business/service providers. This principle permits those to refuse reasonable accommodation if the cost is proved that it exceeds the ability to pay.

EXCLUSION OF SIGNED LANGUAGES FROM LANGUAGE POLICY

The selected examples mentioned above clearly demonstrate that legally recognised signed languages are often excluded from language policies at an operational level and are often administered under the framework of disability policy. Explanations have to be given for these situations. We have to ask:

- Yet, why it does like that ...is it lip service? ...Is it a smokescreen?
- Is it pragmatic? Some people argue given the size of Deaf communities with no obvious economic or political clout that any given right should be embraced, fully exploited and supported to ensure the respectable status of signed languages in society.
- Is it a transitional phase? Other supporters argue that this is just a transitional phase towards a situation where societies realise the true value of signed languages and would treat them accordingly.

However, for the general public, the exclusion of signed languages from language policy seen as unproblematic and commonsensical. Locating signed languages under the umbrella of disability procedures is seen as normal and acceptable. I argue that the exclusion may have been attributed to the fact that the signed languages are regarded as a compensatory tool rather than languages in their own right. The concept of treating signed languages as a compensatory tool is explained here (Conama, 2010).

The general public widely and popularly perceives signed language as the property of Deaf people. There is a widely held view that signed languages are used as a communication tool in order to 'compensate' the loss of ability to hear or speak. This assumption is ignorant of the fact that signed languages more than adequately meet the criteria determining a human language and a coexisting culture. The implications of seeing signed languages as a compensatory tool are very significant. For example, in education policy terms, Deaf children were often sent to remedial classes where signing is the sole method of communication only as a last resort, that is if it is believed that they could not benefit from lip reading or speech training (Conama, 2010). Additionally, with regard to information dissemination services, a request to have information translated into signed languages is often met with incredulity. Excuses for refusing such requests are often justified by suggesting

that Deaf people can read the written languages. Viewing signed language as a compensatory tool rather than an actual language not only has implications for signed language usage it also has implications for the status of Deaf people and Deaf communities (Conama, 2010).

While explaining the concept of treating signed languages as a compensatory tool in order to 'compensate for deafness,' there are a number of obvious implications on the status of signed languages. The implications are:

- Signed languages are treated as a communication option for parents of Deaf children. They are rarely presented as a language in its own right with a full-fledged culture and solidarity-enhancing identity formation for these children.

- Therefore, signed languages are equated to other support services: speech therapy/ training, audiological devices. They are evidently narrated in many literatures even where signed languages are 'tolerated' or 'supported' these days.

- In many quarters, signed languages are even viewed as complementary to these services such as speech therapy / training.

- Signed languages are often viewed as a last resort if the Deaf child 'fails' to optimise speech and listening skills. This view is very prevalent in the Irish Deaf education for the most of the last century.

- 'Deaf people can read so why don't they read' instead of using signed languages is often offered as a rationale for not putting up signed versions for online information dissemination. I have encountered this excuse in both Ireland and Finland in my doctoral research.

Such attitudes clearly view signed languages as a compensatory tool. These attitudes reinforce the compensatory ideals in using signed languages, which in turn affect the egalitarian status of Deaf people. The consequences of having signed languages as a compensatory tool operated under the disability framework on the egalitarian status of Deaf people are:

- Signed languages are tolerated rather than celebrated. Toleration of signed languages rather than celebrating can have significant effects on the egalitarian status of Deaf people. Toleration can convey implicit messages that signed languages are not real in their own right and should be treated as a compensatory tool.

- Branson and Miller (2002) can support this and they argue that the denial of full access to signed languages can be akin to the fact that humanity is not fully fulfilled.

- Signed languages as a compensatory tool can hold back years of potential progress and can even possibly worsen the future prospects for signed languages. Toleration of signed languages would

lessen the ranking importance for prioritising in terms of competing for scarce resources and research funds.

- If signed languages are continued in this compensatory strand and they are more likely to be treated as 'nonaligned' languages. This can be a devastating effect on the prized part of signed language: Deaf culture. The continual of treating signed language can be amounted as ignoring, alienating or silencing the existence of Deaf culture.

Such the consequences can be evidently found in several literatures that can be regarded as supporting or promoting the status of signed languages. Many recent readings and commentaries refer to the statuses of respective signed languages in a tone of necessity for survival:

- Krausneker (2000) surveyed the status of signed languages in Europe and she describes the overall response to the status of signed languages as 'ambivalent.'

- Johnston (2006) is concerned with the research integrity of Auslan given his analysis of the dwindling number of Deaf people in Australia.

- Turner (2006) calls for the legal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and it can be used as a need to preserve heritage of BSL.

While the calls for strengthening the status of signed languages in order to survive in literature is understandable, it is remarkable that many have ignored the the remarkable resilience of signed languages that has happened in the last 200 years and the existence of asymmetrical power relations within the sphere of administering the status of signed languages.

NOW TALKING ABOUT EQUALITY

The Equality Studies Centre in University College, Dublin (Baker et al 2004) had developed an equality framework to identify the different interpretations of equality and their applications. It wants to clarify the differences between the interpretations of equality. It states that three common questions are being asked about equality.

- Equality between whom?
- Equality of what?
- What type of relationship?

In order to answer these questions, many different interpretations come up so the Centre feels the need to categorise the different interpretations into different levels of equality and their related dimensions. In order to deal with the questions mentioned above, the authors choose five main areas

of life where comparisons can be made between liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition.

Within the equality framework there are four contexts where equality or inequality can be generated: the economic, socio-cultural, political and affective spheres. Economic inequalities arise in the sphere of economic relations and refer to the unequal distribution of material resources and inequality in their ownership and control. Socio-cultural inequalities arise in the socio-cultural sphere; they find expression in cultural domination, misrecognition and symbolic misrepresentation or non-representation. Inequalities in the political sphere can be represented by political exclusion, political marginalisation or political misrepresentation. The affective sphere challenges the idea that the individual is simply a rational and autonomous actor. Instead it identifies inequalities in the doing of love and carework and in the deprivation of emotional nurturing and the ability to develop intimate and solidarity-based human relations (Baker, et al, 2004).

Baker, et al. (2004) also identify five dimensions of equality each of which is related to the four contexts in different ways; these are respect and recognition, resources, working and learning, power and the affective dimension. It is important to differentiate between the contexts and dimensions of equality. The contexts refer to the structural relations or sites of social practice where inequality or equality can be promoted. The dimensions refer to different egalitarian issues within the contexts. These impact on different groups in different ways. For example, the primary generative source of class inequality is in the economic sphere where capitalism produces major inequalities in wealth, income and in the ownership and control of goods and services.

The major inequalities for Deaf people arise in the socio-cultural domain where their culture and language is not fully respected or recognised. However, even though an injustice may originate in one domain, it impacts on others; the lack of respect towards signed language means that Deaf people are often excluded from participation in politics and from many areas of employment. All dimensions of inequality are related (for more discussion on the differentiation of dimensions, see chapter 2 of Baker, et al, 2004).

Baker, et al. (2004: 46) warn:

"It would be rash to insist that equalities in the different dimensions are compatible: egalitarians may well have to decide in particular cases how to balance off conflicting demands. But the tendency of the dimensions to reinforce each other shows that there is often no such conflict, and that progress in each dimension is likely to require progress in the others"

Baker, et al. (2004) not only identify different dimensions and contexts of

inequality, they also highlight different perspectives within egalitarian thinking. Egalitarian thinking varies from the minimalist basic equality perspective, to the more demanding equality of opportunity paradigm to the most demanding equality of condition model. Basically equality can be assessed along a spectrum, ranging from seeking weak equality to strong equality. Kwiotek (1999) describes this equality spectrum as a continuum of equality, which ranges from a weak sense of equality towards the ultimate equality. The spectrum will be used to locate possible solutions to the issues facing the Deaf communities.

The first component — basic equality — is really the cornerstone of all egalitarian principles. It is based on the assumption that human beings are 'born equal' (Heywood, 2002). Examples of this would include prohibitions against inhuman actions such as degrading treatment, rape, torture, and other crimes against humanity. These principles are powerful, but can be regarded as minimalist since they do not challenge widespread inequalities.

Liberal egalitarians go beyond this principle of basic equality and focus on equality of opportunity. They will often justify equality in terms of the individual (Baker, et al., 2004). Equality of opportunity means that everyone has the same starting point or equal life chances. They may also justify social inequality, as they hold that talent and capacity for hard work are unequally distributed (Heywood, 2002). Liberal egalitarians regard societal inequalities such as the unequal distribution of income, wealth, resources and power as inevitable and unavoidable, and they, therefore, hold that an approach regulating instead of eliminating inequalities is the best way forward (Baker et al 2004.). An example of regulation of inequalities would be the set up of a minimum acceptable level for everyone, i.e., a minimum wage, a social benefit net to prevent individuals 'falling through,' as well as the regulation of competition to ensure that everyone has a fair chance.

However, we can identify shortcomings within liberal egalitarianism. This level of equality would merely tolerate, instead of celebrate, diversity and accept a private/public distinction, leaving many inequalities within the private sphere untouched. The dominant culture can thus tolerate minority cultures, but not vice versa. Liberal egalitarianism is based on the assumption that inequalities are inevitable, and that our task is, therefore, to make them as fair as possible. Equality of condition goes beyond this. It aims to eliminate major inequalities. It recognises inequalities present in the roots of domination and oppression. Proponents of this point out that those inequalities are rooted in changing and changeable social structures, so therefore, inequalities can be eliminated. This marks a difference from liberal egalitarianism, which believes that certain inequalities are inevitable (Baker, et al., 2004).

Levels and dimensions of equality	Basic equality	Liberal egalitarianism	Equality of condition
Respect and recognition	Basic respect	• Universal citizenship • Toleration of differences • Public/private distinctions	• Universal citizenship • Acceptance of diversity • Redefined public/private distinction • Critical dialogue over cultural differences
Resources	Subsistence needs	Anti-poverty focus	Substantial equality of resources
Love, care and solidarity		A private matter	Ample prospects for love, care and solidarity
Power relations Representation	Protection against inhuman and degrading treatment	Classic civil and personal rights	Liberal rights but limited property rights; group-related rights
Working and learning		• Equal opportunity • Decent work • Basic education	More options for everyone with prospects of self satisfying work

Table 1: Equalities and egalitarianism (Baker, et al., 2004:43)

While it is possible to analyse each context of equality (the economic, political, cultural and affective) in isolation, this does not mean that each example of inequality found in each context exists independently. In reality, all inequalities interact and are complicatedly interwoven. Although the economy is identified as the central context where almost all causes of all inequalities originate, for many social movements, inequalities are found in other contexts (Baker, et al., 2004). For instance, gays and lesbians experience discrimination in cultural terms where societies impose heterosexual values and disregard alternative values (Giddens, 1997). This in turn has financial, health and other implications. Having explained the equality framework briefly, let us turn to identify actual inequalities and specific issues in each context as they would occur to the status of signed languages.

IF WE APPLY EQUALITY FRAMEWORK TO THE STATUS OF SIGNED LANGUAGES...

There are three major ways in which equality is defined in policy terms, basic, liberal and equality of condition (Baker et al 2004). As can be seen from Table 2, the equality of condition focuses on giving full respect and recognition to signed languages rather than merely tolerating them or facilitating them (a liberal position) or denying their importance (the basic equality model). In order to simplify the interface between all areas, a table is created here (Table 2).

With regard to the basic equality, it focuses on basic human rights while ignoring significant structural and social inequalities. As for the liberal egalitarians, they recognise the inequalities but aim to minimise them rather than eliminating these inequalities. However, the liberal egalitarians can be problematic because of the range of views within liberalism. For example, some liberals are quite radical in relation to equality while others rear towards a more cautious conservative view. It is not surprising therefore, some egalitarian measures based on the liberal policies can be liberating for Deaf communities. The target for achieving the equality of condition for Deaf communities, is the development of positive language policies.

This basic equality thinking resembles the medical model's views on signed languages quite a lot. Both the basic equality strand and the medical model tend to support the assimilation of signed language users. Both claim a noble purpose: to have the users of signed languages assimilated into societies as much as possible. The assimilation can be interpreted as motivated by having basic equality for all and to ensure all have access to society. The assimilation can be interpreted as motivated by providing Deaf people with the basic communicative capacity to interact with other members of society, while assuming that they are incapable of communicating at the same level as those others (Conama, 2010).

The social model can be aligned with the liberal egalitarians. This implies toleration and cooperation by all concerned and remains silent on structural inequalities, namely the status and culture associated with the language itself. Both areas emphasise the assimilationist principle but the proponents of the social model recognise that the sources of oppression are in societies not in languages (Conama, 2010).

The Deafhood framework (Ladd, 2003) is easily aligned with the view of language as a 'right' because both emphasise the uniqueness of languages and more importantly, recognise the cultural links to the languages. Both the Deafhood and the language as a right perspectives reject the idea that languages are the sources of the problem or that they can be compromised.

Therefore, the Deafhood perspectives demand respect and recognition for languages so their users can enjoy meaningful equality in societies. In that sense, the Deafhood and language as a right perspectives are aligned with the equality of condition perspective as they focus on radical structure changes.

Levels of equality (Baker et al, 2004)	General characteristic reasons for such disadvantaged situations	General characteristic solutions / reasons to address situations	General perspectives on Deaf people and communities
Basic equality	Signed languages blamed for poverty / Individuals, not societies are blamed for problems	Banish / ameliorate / replace signed languages with majority languages in order to increase likelihood of accessing majority societies	Medical
Liberal egalitarians[10]	• Signed languages are unfairly treated and should be supported as much as possible • They are treated as compensatory or communication tools rather than languages in its own right	Signed languages are tolerated rather than celebrated or equalised alongside with majority languages	Social
Equality of condition	Signed languages are unfairly situated by structural factors and societies	Societal or structural issues must be addressed to ensure the equal treatment of signed languages	Deafhood

Table 2: The relationship between levels of equality with signed language policy orientations and general perspectives on Deaf people and communities

The Deafhood model represents a major challenge to existing perspectives on Deaf people. Because the radical view of Deaf people and their community are challenges to two former perspectives on Deaf people, it allows the review of existing materials and the interpretation of them through the lens of Deafhood. The reinterpretation of such materials has been astonish-

ing and has enabled me to pinpoint the differences of treatment and attitudes between these differing perspectives on Deaf people.

The Deafhood philosophy as outlined briefly above seems the best framework to achieve equality of condition for signed languages because unlike other philosophies, the Deafhood celebrates rather than tolerates signed languages and it is a crucial difference. This philosophy purports that signed languages can be available for everyone regardless of their hearing status. For the native users or those who prefer signed languages, the Deafhood philosophy requires self-respect and dignity for signed language users and encourage those adherents to move away from the disability framework. This also provides a platform to re-energise Deaf communities

LIKELY IMPLICATIONS OF EMPLOYING THE EQUALITY OF CONDITION APPROACH TO LANGUAGE POLICIES FOR SIGNED LANGUAGES

The Deafhood perspective has implications also for the shaping of language policies based on the principle of equality of condition. The first step is that authorities should re-designate the status of sign languages as languages rather than as disabilities that need compensatory tools or support services. The next step is to remove the re-designated signed languages from the disability policies and denominate them under the aegis of language policies. This would necessitate the making of positive language policies explicit because it is clear from this research that implicit language policies are largely influenced by other factors such as attitudes, economic considerations and political prioritisation.

This re-designated status of signed languages must not be seen as closing off the disability policies from Deaf people who wish to avail of such policies" in order to access services. The point here is that ISL should be regarded as a language in its own right and should have its policies under the aegis of language policies rather than under disability policies. This move has the potential to shift public attitudes towards the status of ISL and to lessen the discretionary actions taken by some providers. Two areas singled out for prioritisation are language policy in education and access to information.

The re-designated status of signed languages would demand the overhaul of language policy in education. The implications are obvious, as signed languages would not be seen as compensatory tools or optional communication tools. The overhaul would see the rewriting of information aimed at parents of Deaf children. Though the formal education process starts at preschool or primary level, for Deaf children, the process begins further back at the intervention process because decisions taking place in this process are often influential and shape the directions of future educational pathways.

Therefore, it is necessary to involve the Deaf community, via Deaf professionals, in the intervention process. It is not guaranteed that parents would opt for signed languages but it is crucial that they are informed of such available pathways and should be made aware of possible consequences if they decide to choose a particular pathway.

Re-designating signed languages, as a real language in its own right would have implications on the schools for the Deaf. It would demand a strict enforcement of fluency among teachers. It would demand that teachers have to teach in these schools. In order to protect the status of signed languages in the schools, the board of management and management posts would have to be adequately representative of the Deaf communities to ensure their influential presence. This would demand a detailed change that would need cooperation from all concerned starting with the parents and including the teacher unions.

The re-designated status of signed languages would have huge implications for language policies relating to access to information. The policies would have to be explicitly stated, as it is clear from both countries that such information policies are largely implicit: the belief is that signed language users should avail of text-based information instead of receiving information through signed languages. This perspective fails to recognise the effectiveness of receiving information through that first, natural or mother language. The re-designated status of signed languages would put in place a requirement to take account of the learning needs of Deaf children.

It appears from this research that both states have failed to exploit multimedia to transmit information in indigenous signed languages. Websites and email messages with video attachments are the clear examples where general information can be translated into signed languages but they have not been generally utilised to date. The redesignation of signed languages would increase their profiles on websites. Not only would the profile of signed languages be increased, it would remove a considerable burden on Deaf users as some of the respondents cited that they had to travel to get information that was not available through other means. These burdens are unfairly imposed (whether unintentional or not), and hinder Deaf people's ability to exercise their citizenship.

Promoting the status of signed languages would increase the scrutiny of interpretation services and this would necessitate the need for a national accreditation process. At the moment, in Ireland, it is clear that the quality and suitability of interpreters is done discretionarily. There is no statutory body regulating the accreditation and register of interpreters in Ireland. At the moment, it seems from my doctoral research that in both countries (Ireland and Finland) quantity is far more prioritised than the quality of

the interpretation services. To uphold the status of signed language would mean to shift more attention to the workings of procedures and the authorities might then take more responsibility in arranging interpretation facilities. There is a possibility that such a shift would lead to a realisation that such an interpretation facility is more about abridging between two languages, spoken and signed languages rather than viewing it as a type of support service. Another related development could arise from this shift, namely, that service providers would encourage some of their staff members to achieve functional fluency in signed languages to deal with Deaf consumers.

There is a significant deal of goodwill among public and private service providers regarding the status of signed languages and it must be taken advantage of to advance the concept of Deafhood in the reformulation of language policies.

CONCLUSION

Having outlined the structure of this presentation and its focus on the current status of signed languages and critique of their status, the current statuses of signed languages in several countries have not advanced the equality of Deaf communities as desired. The equality framework devised by the Equality Studies Centre in University College Dublin assists us in understanding the concept of equality and how it can be applied to determine the level of equality of these statuses of signed languages. We can see the likely consequences of according less respect and reduced recognition for signed languages. It is argued that full respect and full recognition for signed languages can advance equality for Deaf communities.

Too often, the compromised approach adopted by those seeking legal/official recognition for signed languages treat the current status as a stepping stone towards further equality, find themselves in an ambiguous situation. They have to realise promised egalitarian measures are not readily forthcoming on the basis of ambiguous statuses of signed languages.

ENDNOTES

1. A word of caution here, not every language has its aligned culture. For example, computer programming has its own specific language but does not necessarily have a culture; however, every indigenous culture has a language.
2. *Hands On*, an Ireland-based television programme, reports that 45 countries worldwide have bestowed legal status on their indigenous sign languages (http://www.rte.ie/tv/handson).
3. The distinction between the terms 'native language' and 'first language' has originated from the field of language acquisition. Native language users are those individuals whose parents' language is sign language, while those who are first language users are born to parents who

4. do not sign. In the latter case, sign language is acquired when the individual arrives at the school for the Deaf. This distinction will become more apparent as this research progresses.

These investigations made a recurring theme that Deaf respondents preferred to recount their experiences or responses in signed languages because they felt that they articulate it in that way much better than through spoken or written languages.

5. It is widely recognised that 90% or more of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. Furthermore, it is quite common that these parents do not have sign language skills, thus reducing the level of exposure that their children may have to sign language as the natural method of acquiring language. It has also been reported that parents are often advised against using sign language with their children (more discussion of this topic may be found in later chapters).

6. This publication is a wide collection of articles and they are from several countries; the most common theme is the oppression of sign languages.

7. This can be exemplified by the following two cases. The first case is that the French language was thought to be recognised legally in France for centuries but in fact, the legislative recognition took place in the 1990s. This is so despite the fact that for centuries, the French populace and even academic scholars discussed the French language as if it was already legally recognised (Schiffman, 2006, 117). Another case is slightly different and English is the dominant language in the United States, though it is not constitutionally recognised but given the dominance of English, it can be argued that English is the de facto official language. Entry to education and career development depends on the competence of English as prevalent throughout the US society, which is tacitly approved by the majority there.

8. Some of these countries also have their signed languages constitutionally recognised.

9. Email from the Embassy of Finland, Dublin (December 11, 2007).

10. Liberal egalitarians should not be treated as a monolithic in their views and application of egalitarian measures. There is a very broad continuum in this category stretching from weak liberals to radical liberals. In the political philosophy, both Nozick and Rawls can be considered as liberals but they do not share the same views on the limits of individual liberty and the extent of government intervention in social services.

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