

## SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE DEAF PEOPLE: A STUDY ON PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

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**Abstract.** Today, when various regulatory documents support sign language research, there is a lack of both teaching materials and research on deaf sign language and public understanding. The study aims to determine the public's proficiency or competence in the Latvian sign language. The research revealed people's basic knowledge of Latvian sign language grammar, their ability to communicate and understand deaf people, their attitudes and opinions about the process, and the necessity of learning sign language. Information was studied in four blocks of questions: society's attitude towards deaf sign language, society's knowledge of deaf sign language, communication skills with a deaf person, and opinion on the development of deaf sign language and its necessity. The sample of the study is 500 respondents, who represent the opinion of the population between the ages of 16 and 60, observing the socio-demographic parameters of the target group of the study. An empirical research method was used in the study; to collect data, an electronic survey was conducted. In general, the study confirms that society shows a positive attitude towards Latvian sign language as a means of communication for deaf people. At the same time, the data reveal poor knowledge of sign language and its grammar. It was concluded that not only sociological research is needed on public perceptions of deaf sign language, but also various educational events for the rest of society should be promoted, including seminars, courses, and conferences.

**Keywords:** communication, interpreter, knowledge, sign language of the deaf, society.

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### Introduction

Support for sign language development and research is encouraged by the law and other legal acts. The development of the Latvian sign language, as well as its use for communication with deaf people, is ensured by the State Language Law (Valsts valodas likums, 1999). Also, the regulatory document "On the State Language Policy Guidelines for 2021-2027" supports developing and learning the Latvian sign language (Par valsts valodas politikas pamatnostādņēm 2021.–2027. gadam, 2021). It is important in order to promote knowledge of the Latvian sign language and strengthen qualitative changes. As Daniel L. Everett acknowledges, "the languages of the world are a source of linguistic and cultural diversity" (Everets, 2022, 246); similarly, sign language is the basis of the cultural diversity of deaf people. By promoting the development of sign language (e.g. developing the Latvian deaf sign language corpus), the opportunities to learn deaf sign language for anyone would definitely improve.

The study aims to determine the public's proficiency or competence in the Latvian sign language. Its basis is formed (or not formed) by people's basic knowledge of the grammar of Latvian sign language, their ability to communicate with deaf people, their attitude and beliefs about the process of learning sign language, and the need and necessity of it. It is essential to find out whether society as a whole shows a positive attitude towards the Latvian sign language and the culture of people who speak sign language and if society is empathetic, aware of its role, is ready to get involved in the creation of an inclusive society and solving current issues. Therefore, a study of the opinions and experiences of the wider society, Latvian residents, related to the understanding and knowledge of deaf sign language was carried out, which would allow conclusions to be drawn about the participation of the Latvian society in promoting inclusive processes. An empirical research method was used in the work, an electronic survey

was conducted for data collection. Considering that different stories of experiences related to deaf sign language are possible, four study blocks were created.

The following set of information was studied:

- 1) society's attitude towards deaf sign language,
- 2) public knowledge of deaf sign language,
- 3) communication skills with a deaf person,
- 4) opinion on the development of deaf sign language and its necessity.

### **Literature review**

Until now, extensive studies have not been conducted in Latvia on the public's proficiency or attitude towards the Latvian sign language. Journalistic or popular science articles are mainly available, providing a general insight. Since 2007, every resident of Latvia has had the opportunity to get acquainted with the native language of deaf people – sign language – on the Internet (see [www.zimjuvaloda.lv](http://www.zimjuvaloda.lv)). Deaf people who use sign language daily can get relevant information on the website. Also, this website provides an opportunity to educate anyone interested in sign language or who needs it in communication with fellow deaf people.

Although Latvia is one of the 41 European countries where the Latvian sign language is legally recognised (World Federation of the Deaf, 2016), in a 2021 interview at the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, it was recognised that the state did not support the development of sign language for many years. In order to promote public understanding of sign language and the learning of sign language, it is planned to create language learning courses and develop teaching aids (Zīmju valoda attīstās līdzī laikam, 2021).

The youth organisation, "Efraims", within the framework of various projects, also activates the guidelines developed in the European Union to reduce discrimination and promote equality in the attitude towards the employment and integration of deaf young people in the labour market, education, and profession choices in Latvia and the European Union, explaining the principle of equal treatment and recognising discrimination in the attitude towards people with disabilities, creating reasonable workplaces, for example, interpreting in sign language, providing specific telecommunications equipment, telephone sound amplifiers, light signalling, and special listening systems. The guidelines were developed for employers to explain how to work with a deaf person and how to use the help of a sign language interpreter (ES vadlīnijas nedzirdīgu cilvēku nediskriminācijai (vienlīdzībai) sabiedrībā, 2006). Because using public agencies' services often means one-on-one meetings, those unfamiliar with the workings of a sign language interpreter assume that the interpreter participates in the meeting. However, a sign language interpreter is meant to facilitate communication and does not directly participate in the conversation (Sign language interpreting in public service settings, 1995).

As seen in the reviewed sources, the public's understanding of the use and the users of sign language is very narrow. In the Latvian language, no measures have been taken in recent years to promote public education and understanding of sign language and its users.

### **Methodology**

In order to answer the research questions, a quantitative survey of the population of Latvia was chosen. An online survey was used as the data collection technique. The survey included the following questions:

1. How do Latvian residents understand the concept of sign language for the deaf?
2. What is the general attitude of Latvian residents towards sign language for the deaf?
3. What is the personal participation self-assessment of Latvian residents in relation to deaf sign language?

4. What is the general participation self-assessment of Latvian citizens in relation to deaf sign language?
5. What is the level of awareness (including sources of information) and knowledge of deaf sign language among Latvian residents?
6. What is the general awareness of Latvian residents about support for the development of sign language for the deaf?
7. What is the degree of participation of a resident of Latvia to be able to communicate with a deaf person?
8. What is the attitude of Latvian residents regarding state support for the development of sign language for the deaf?
9. What are the perceptions of Latvian residents about who should take responsibility for the development of sign language for the deaf?
10. What are the threats to the development of deaf sign language, according to the opinion of the population?

A total of 872 residents from all cultural and historical regions participated in the survey. The sample of the study is 500 respondents, representing the opinion of the population aged from 16 to 60 years. The socio-demographic parameters of the research target group – gender, nationality, age, district, and type of settlement – were observed, ensuring their even sampling. This was done to ensure the objectivity of the study, assuming that the characteristics of the target group may be related to their opinion or experiences.

Characteristics that were studied with the help of questionnaire questions about deaf sign language were measured for the first time in Latvia, for example, society's attitude, knowledge, communication skills with a deaf person, and understanding of the reasons for the threats to sign language.

## **Research results**

### **Public attitudes towards sign language for the deaf**

Before researching the opinions of Latvian residents on issues related to specific knowledge, the survey clarified the respondents' ideas about the concept of sign language for the deaf. The data show that a large part of the population of Latvia has a concrete idea about the concept of sign language for the deaf. The Latvian residents most often associate deaf sign language with gestures, less with body movements and lip shapes. Positive discourse in relation to deaf sign language prevails in Latvian society, and no negative actions are highlighted. When looking at the data in correlation with the respondents' age group, place of residence and nationality, a slight difference is noticeable – the respondents who live in cities and are of an economically active age (around 20–50 years old) are more positive, but the differences between these parameters are small.

### **Public knowledge of sign language for the deaf**

When studying the awareness and knowledge of Latvian residents about sign language for the deaf, questions were asked that require more detailed knowledge and experience. Answers to questions, “Does sign language have certain grammar rules? Is a sentence in sign language made according to special rules? Are only non-verbal communication gestures used in deaf sign language? Are there several types of Latvian sign language for deaf people?”, show the lack in respondents' knowledge. Almost everyone has heard about sign language, but not everyone knows how it differs from oral language with its specific use of signs and certain grammatical structures. The deaf sign language lexicon consists of manual signs. They cannot be equated with gestures of non-verbal communication because the means of non-verbal communication are mainly used to express the emotional aspect of information. In addition, the stock of manual signs is wide and varied. It is also supplemented and refined depending on the

culture and level of knowledge of the deaf sign language user. In general, “people who have been using sign language since childhood can communicate with it as quickly and effectively as those who use a voice machine”. (Everets, 2022, 146) It is believed that in the Latvian deaf sign language, signs have 56 types of hand shapes. The hand position is the position of the palm and fingertips in relation to the speaker’s body. Accordingly, the site of sign formation is a limited space in front of the speaker. Often, respondents do not know that manual signs are made in different places: above the speaker’s head, at the nape of the neck, forehead, temples, nose, cheeks, ears, mouth, lower jaw, chin, neck, shoulders, arms, stomach, legs, etc. Also, the movement in the structure of the manual sign can have different variants: straight, wave-like, angular, spiral, cross movements, etc. Therefore, the place of making signs and the movement of hands are important for full-fledged communication. The nature and type of sign movement are denoted by arrows in special sign language dictionaries. The creators of these dictionaries, experts from the Latvian Association of the Deaf, have so far identified at least 11 of the most characteristic movement types (Bethere, 2023).

There is a misconception that there is only one sign language. In fact, each language has its own official sign language and has a certain nationality. “Each language contains a history of the symbiosis of grammar, mind, and culture” (Everets, 2022, 23). Also, there are regional dialects or dialects of different social groups within the structure of each national sign language. As in other countries, Latvia also has diverse regional and social group sign language dialects. Latvian sign language also uses jargon, international words, borrowings, and barbarisms. The use of signs varies in different parts of Latvia, and people of different generations also use different signs. Therefore, it can be said that “language is a repository of the riches of a unique cultural experience” (Everets, 2022, 247).

Also, the respondents’ replies indicate a lack of knowledge about the syntax of deaf sign language. Latvian sign language of deaf people has its own rules for creating a sentence – hence its own syntax. For example, a noun that names a subject will be mentioned first. The signs denoting action or property are not at the beginning of the utterance. The property designation is placed after the sign to which it refers. Action markers are placed at the end of the utterance. The means of expressing modality, such as negation or address, are at the end of the utterance (Bethere, 2023).

Deaf sign language also has word classes (noun, verb, adjective) and their possible grammatical categories, such as gender and number. For example, the meaning of a grammatical number in the Latvian deaf sign language is expressed in various ways, i.e. repeating a manual sign multiple times or connecting the relevant nominative sign with a number designation. In this case, the number sign is placed before the nominative sign, which in turn is used in the singular.

Here, some facts are mentioned that are the basis of deaf sign language. It would be necessary to find solutions so that deaf sign language learning and information are available to everyone interested.

### **Communication skills with a deaf person**

Human communication almost always involves the transmission and interpretation of signs (Everets, 2022, 106), however, communication with a deaf person requires other knowledge and skills. In order to evaluate the public’s communication skills with a deaf person, several additional questions were asked. To the question, “Are you ready to communicate with a deaf person in simple situations?”, most respondents answered affirmatively. 50% are ready to communicate with a deaf person in simple situations, 30% are not sure about the quality of communication, and 20% would avoid communication with a deaf person. Of course, learning sign language can improve communication with a deaf person, but it is also important to educate

society about basic elements of communication, for example, you can use written communication, and gesture and body language, and you need to speak slowly and maintain eye contact when talking. When evaluating the multiple-choice options, the respondents had the opportunity to mark, in their opinion, the most important activity in communication with a deaf person (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Personal self-assessment of participation in communication with a deaf person*

Answers	Number of respondents
would use gestures of non-verbal communication	121
would use sign language for the deaf	11
would use written language	96
would use gestures and speak slowly	272

To the question, “Do you know how to communicate with a deaf person?”, most respondents, i.e. 79% answered in the negative, while 20% were not sure about the quality of their communication. The respondents state the lack of information on where to learn sign language for the deaf and the lack of time as the biggest excuses. Only 1% of respondents answered affirmatively, most often additionally indicating that they are either related to a deaf person and have learned communication skills, or work as deaf language interpreters.

Likewise, in measuring citizens’ participation, it is important to know the individual’s personal participation and involvement in the process of creating an inclusive society. To the question, “Would you learn sign language?”, the majority of respondents replied that they were not ready to learn sign language (70%). On the other hand, one quarter of the respondents, or 25%, did not clearly express their position, pointing to the lack of necessity, and unimportance. Only 5% of society members express a desire to learn sign language for the deaf. It is little enough.

**Opinion on the development of deaf sign language and its necessity**

It is also important to investigate the public’s opinion on the development of sign language for the deaf, and state support for the provision of various functions. In their answers to the question, “Who should take responsibility for the development of sign language for the deaf?”, respondents, firstly, mention the state, secondly, the institutions that represent the deaf community. At the same time, most respondents have no information about specific state support for the development of sign language for the deaf. In fact, sign language is recognized and supported in Latvia, as it is in other countries. This is ensured by the State Language Law. Article 3, paragraph 3 of the State Language Law stipulates that “the state ensures the development and use of Latvian sign language for communication with deaf people” (Valsts valodas likums, 1999). The document “On the State Language Policy Guidelines for 2021-2027” emphasises and notes such values as the standardisation, learning, and popularisation of Latvian sign language for the deaf, and development of sign language resources. Sign language is mentioned six times in this document. Sign language is identified here as an important issue for the management of Latvian language policy. Several positions are highlighted here, such as the need to educate teachers, create training programs for sign language interpreters, create new types of teaching aids, including digital ones, and develop the Latvian sign language.

In response to the question, “What are the threats to the development of deaf sign language?”, the lack of funding for both the development of electronic resources and the development of inventions and technologies that would ensure successful communication and information circulation is most often mentioned. Deaf sign language development can have a variety of challenges. Successful communication also requires public support.

## Conclusions

In general, the study confirms that society shows a positive attitude towards Latvian sign language as a means of communication for deaf people. Only 5% of the respondents have had direct contact with a deaf person, but only 1% know how to communicate with these people, i.e. they know the sign language. A large number of respondents, i.e. 50%, would be ready to communicate with a deaf person. It means that promoting public interest and knowledge about the Latvian sign language is necessary.

Also, the survey data show that 50% of respondents would like to learn sign language, but only 5% know where to find information about lessons or training.

Similar data are available on the desired state and the current situation: 50% believe that the surrounding society should know sign language for the deaf, but only 5% are ready to learn sign language. Self-motivation, lack of time, and personality are essential here.

At the same time, the data reveal poor knowledge of sign language and its grammar. Not only sociological research on public perceptions of deaf sign language is needed, but various educational events for the rest of society, including seminars, courses, and conferences, should be promoted. In order for the surrounding community to be informed about deaf sign language, its research must expand the field of information and expand the dialogue with society. It is necessary to promote public interest and knowledge about the Latvian sign language, the need for its development, as well as the possibility of using it for communication with deaf people.

It would also be necessary to continue research on children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their opportunities to learn the Latvian sign language at an early age to promote their cognitive, academic, social and emotional development.

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