

# ISHARA RESEARCH SERIES

## Language Vitalization through Language Documentation and Description in the Kosovar Sign Language Community

Karin Hoyer





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**Language Vitalization through Language  
Documentation and Description in the Kosovar Sign  
Language Community**

Karin Hoyer

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## **1. Introduction**

My experience was – coming from a Deaf<sup>1</sup> family – that all the years in school [...] I thought that hearing people who use spoken language were better than we Deaf people who had to gesture and sign. We were Deaf, meaning disabled and inferior. I mean, I had good communication through signing with Deaf people but I did not think sign language was proper as a language. Then I started the sign language research work here and thought ‘okay, we will work on documenting signs for teaching purposes’. But then we were given all this training [...], and I was so amazed about all the things I learned about sign language. I realized that sign language is important and we are equal to hearing people. Spoken and signed languages are similar! And I thought how wrong I had been all these years, thinking sign language was something more simple. But it was because I did not know since I had never had access to this information.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant; my translation) -

The opening quote above presents insights offered by a Deaf sign language user involved in a community empowerment project taking place in the Kosovar sign language community. The results of the project focus on the importance of the perspective of language users themselves, their inner (linguistic) resources, and learning potential.

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of ‘Deaf’ with a capital ‘D’ in this paper is a conventionalized way of referring to non-hearing people as members of a cultural and linguistic community, rather than defining them in terms of their audiological status.

## 2 Introduction

The aim of this study is twofold. Firstly I scrutinize some of the methodological issues and particular challenges that we faced in our work on language revitalization – or more specifically, language vitalization – and community empowerment in the Kosovar Sign Language (KosSL) community.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, I give an account of some important results concerning the preconditions for our work, including what I see as a successful language vitalization process, by giving the floor to the Kosovar people who have been involved in implementing the work. In bringing the views of the sign language community directly to the reader, this study is a continuation of the participatory methods that have been applied in the project. In order to realise this aim, the text is rich in quotations.

Language vitalization and community empowerment in the Kosovar sign language community commenced as part of a development co-operation project funded by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD). The project **is described as 'development co-operation' to emphasise the fact that two partner organisations** – in Finland and Kosovo – are working on the project together as equals. This joint project between the FAD and the Kosovar

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper the term 'sign language community' or 'KosSL community' is used when referring to the speech community using KosSL. I prefer to use these terms instead of Deaf community in order to put the focus on the language of the group – also hearing persons with KosSL as their first language can be members of the community.

Association of the Deaf (KAD<sup>3</sup>) consists of organizational and management training, advocacy work, linguistic training, language research through sign language documentation and description, and sign language interpreter training. The first three-year cycle of the project was launched in 2003. The linguistic training and the sign language documentation and description work started in 2006 and is ongoing at the time of writing. Two of the long-term development objectives of the project are the official recognition of KosSL as the first language (i.e., primary language or mother tongue) of the Deaf, and the further development of Deaf education with the ultimate aim of establishing bilingual education for Deaf children in Kosovo. These long-term goals are directed towards promoting social equality and democracy by improving human and linguistic rights for Deaf people. The goals are in accordance with the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where sign language is considered a key feature of Deaf people's **human rights**.

At this point it would be helpful to explain the part that I have played in the project. As linguistic advisor, my role included giving advice on linguistic activities and language policy, providing linguistic training, and planning the linguistic

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<sup>3</sup> KAD was established in 2007 as a result of the development **co-operation project**. **Before its existence FAD's partners** in the joint project were eleven regional Deaf clubs representing the KosSL community.

#### 4 *Introduction*

activities of the project together with Kosovar sign language users. Since I was personally involved in the work, some of the analysis is based on my observations during several years of project work. However, the main data have been collected through interviews and focus group discussions that took place in Kosovo in May 2009. I conducted video interviews with two Deaf research assistants who were in charge of the language documentation and dictionary work, Nebih Cakaj and Drita Toprlak. These interviews covered their personal experiences of working in the project, language use, and language attitudes. Nebih and Drita then conducted a focus group discussion on similar topics with four Deaf representatives of the sign language working group, Liridon Gashi, Elma Hasani, Kimete Haziri, and Faton Parduži. This took place without my presence. I also interviewed the other four KAD staff members – Enver Kurtalani, Ramadan Gashi, Rukije Gashi, and Selman Hoti – about their opinions and experiences of the language documentation and dictionary work. In addition to this, I arranged a focus group discussion with four hearing teachers at Nëna Terezë deaf school in Prizren. I wanted to collect the **teachers'** opinions of the sign language training classes that they had attended as part of the project.

My standpoint, as an outside hearing sign linguist, can be **described in the spirit of Okoth Okombo's words. Okombo was** also a hearing linguist coming into a sign language community from outside (1992: 59):

That burning urge to find out formed the basis of my first interest in Sign Language. As I read and asked questions about the language, I came to realize that the Deaf were perhaps the most misunderstood language minority anywhere in the world. [...] Hearing people often talk about the rehabilitation of the Deaf. Now, it seems to me, what one ought to talk about is not the rehabilitation, but the liberation of the Deaf. I believe the science of linguistics has a significant role to play in that liberation struggle.

## **1.1 The structure of the study**

The study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 presents a discussion on language revitalization in general, and this is followed by relevant background information on the Kosovar sign language community and KosSL (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses on the methods that have been used for KosSL documentation, and the challenges associated with the relationship between a sign language community and an outside hearing linguistic advisor. In Chapter 5 the results of the study are presented, and these include the preconditions for the vitalization process, which have been identified through an analysis of data collected in interviews and focus group discussions. The precondition topics include aspects on

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heightened language awareness, involvement of the community and use of Deaf role models; and some methodological issues, such as the significance of language documentation and description within the language vitalization and community empowerment process. Chapter 6 deals with two approaches emerging from the data on sign language vitalization – sign language as a (human) right, and sign language as a resource. Finally, **the study's conclusions and findings are presented in Chapter 7**, and the implications for similar work in other communities are discussed.

## **2. Language endangerment, revitalization and community empowerment**

From a global perspective, it is well known that language diversity is at risk. Language shift and language death have been the focus of extensive linguistic research during the last few decades. Growing concern about the danger of human languages disappearing has led to the initiation of several revitalization programmes in different parts of the world. In order to raise awareness of language endangerment and the need to protect linguistic diversity, UNESCO, as part of its endangered languages program, provides an on-line atlas of **the world's languages** in danger, maintains a register of good practices for language preservation, and lists websites and online resources.<sup>4</sup>

As Hinton (2001a: 5–6) points out in her description of the steps towards language revitalization, the goal of revitalization depends entirely on the specific situation of the language. Several factors influence which revitalization actions need to be taken, such as the size of the language community, its level of political power, the level of language documentation, and the resources available.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages> [retrieved 9.12.2010]



## 8 *Language endangerment and vitalization*

In order to set realistic goals for the revitalization process, the vitality of the language in question needs to be assessed. The UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) outlines nine major evaluative factors for language vitality and state of endangerment: (1) Intergenerational language transmission; (2) Absolute number of speakers; (3) Proportion of speakers within the total population; (4) Shifts in domains of language use; (5) Response to new domains and media; (6) Materials for language education and literacy; (7) Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use; **(8) Community members' attitudes toward their own language;** (9) Type and quality of documentation. Although these nine factors need to be considered together in order to thoroughly assess the vitality of the language, the most frequently used factor is intergenerational language transmission. The Expert Group (2003: 8–9) distinguishes six degrees of endangerment based on the level of transmission of a language from one generation to another. The language can be classified as safe, unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered, or extinct.

Consequently, the state of a language can be assessed on a scale from vital to endangered (and extinct). Features within the language community that influence the revitalization program need to be distinguished from facts connected to the

surrounding society when planning revitalization actions. Grenoble & Whaley (2006: 22) define issues influencing endangered language situations on two levels: micro-variables and macro-variables. Micro-level issues apply on the local level and involve demographics, attitudes and cultural practices. Macro-level issues are legislation and policies such as governmental support for endangered languages, language planning and educational goals, and apply to local, regional, national and extra-national spheres. These issues, along with their potential impact, need to be identified and considered when setting the goals for a successful revitalization process.

Revitalization activities vary from assessing the resources available and setting the goals, to creating literacy programs and teacher training, updating the lexicon into new domains, and launching bilingual education programs. Whether a language is used for instruction in education is generally regarded as a crucial influence on language vitality. Hinton (2001a: 13–14) discusses different concrete methods to encourage and develop the use of an endangered language. The challenge is to create communicative situations where the language can be used. Hinton underlines family education – teaching families how to bring the native language into the home – as an example of such a situation.

The home as the focal point for language transmission is one of the factors where spoken language endangerment

differs as compared to sign language endangerment – this fact also affects the focus for the (re)vitalization process for a signed language (I will return to this discussion in Chapter 6). The discontinuous nature of sign language transmission is usually the rule rather than the exception, since the vast majority of Deaf children are not born to Deaf parents. It is usually estimated that between 90 and 95% of Deaf children have hearing parents. In Mitchell & Karchmer's study (2004), it is reported that 92% of Deaf and hard of hearing students have two hearing parents. With respect to sign languages and endangerment, Nonaka (2004) addresses the regrettable but unavoidable reality that sign languages are often forgotten or neglected in discussions of language endangerment, language documentation, and revitalization. As Nonaka points out, this is partly due to a relatively recent linguistic recognition of sign languages as human languages, and of Deaf communities as minority language communities. Delayed recognition has meant that numerous national and indigenous sign languages around the world are still completely undescribed or underdescribed, and many of them are also endangered.

Schembri (2010: 119) argues that sign languages can be considered as always having been endangered. This is due to interrupted language transmission from one generation to the next, and the active suppression of sign language use within the oralist approaches of Deaf education. Schembri (2010: 121–

122) observes that the changing demographics of deafness in Western countries, resulting in the birth of fewer deaf children, is a threat to the maintenance of sign languages. He also notes that the use of new hearing aid technology, such as cochlear implants, often means a shift in emphasis to speech and listening, and the exclusion of sign language. The endangerment of signed languages in developing countries is slightly different, since they have not yet necessarily been reached by the new hearing aid technology. Schembri (2010: 124) notes that in developing countries many sign languages are endangered because a foreign sign language is imported to be used as the language of instruction in Deaf education; this new language threatens the local sign language(s).

In many places in the world it is American Sign Language that has been adopted as the language of instruction. Youngs & Upah (2010: 6) report that in Nigeria the government promotes the use of 'a fusion of American Sign Language (ASL), Langue des Signes Français (LSF) and Nigerian Sign Language' instead of Nigerian Sign Language, which is the language advocated by the Deaf association representing the language users. Sign languages can also be endangered due to a more dominant sign language originating within the same country. In Finland, the majority sign language, Finnish Sign Language, is increasingly being used in more and more domains at the expense of the minority language Finland-Swedish Sign

Language. This is mainly due to the closing down of the only Finland-Swedish school for the Deaf (Hoyer 2004).

Like the majority of the **world's** spoken languages, sign languages lack a written form. Notation systems exist, such as the Hamburg Notational System and Sutton Sign Writing, but sign language users mainly use the written form of the spoken language of the hearing community, i.e. their second language, for writing. Orthographic development may play a central part in a revitalization program for an endangered language, but a written form of the language is neither a prerequisite nor a necessary consequence of language revitalization. Referring to efforts to revitalise the Keres language, Benjamin et al. (1996) draw attention to the strength of oral tradition and its role in maintaining Cochiti culture. The decision not to include written language development in language planning activities was made by the community. The role and active involvement of the language community is emphasized throughout the revitalization literature. For revitalization efforts to truly succeed, the community needs to be in control of all phases – in decision making, in planning, in implementation, and in the evaluation of the revitalization activities done.

Helander (2008, 2009) makes a distinction between the *revitalization* and the *vitalization* of a language. In his studies *revitalization* describes situations where Sámi is no longer naturally transmitted to younger generations and the majority

language is used instead; therefore concrete actions need to be taken in order to support language transmission. By *vitalization* Helander refers to the promotion of the use of Sámi in new domains. The difference between these two terms is relevant to actions taken in the case of Kosovo. In this study I use the term *vitalization in accordance with Helander's use, to refer to actions taken in order to strengthen the status of a language and to promote its use in new domains.*

Language vitalization is closely connected with *community empowerment*. In a society built on the conditions of the majority, i.e. hearing people, Deaf people using sign language often encounter barriers and prejudices. Community empowerment aims to increase the strength, autonomy, and capacity of the community. Empowerment is crucial in order to attain equal (linguistic) human rights and to get access to public services and education in sign language. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 569) considers a high level of bilingualism through education to be one of the basic linguistic human rights for people belonging to a minority. She describes Deaf education as having been in the hands of hearing **"experts"** and the Deaf themselves as not having had possibilities to influence the organization of their education.



### **3. The Kosovar sign language community and KosSL**

The Republic of Kosovo is situated on the Balkan Peninsula. After the war in 1999 Kosovo broke away from Serbia and announced its independence in 2008. The constitution of Kosovo declares the country to **be a 'multi-ethnic society' with** the official languages of Albanian and Serbian. At the municipal level, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma languages also have the status of official languages. The Statistical Office of Kosovo estimates the total population to be 2.1 million inhabitants, of whom 92% are Albanians, 5.3% are Serbs, and 2.7% are from other ethnic groups. No official statistics on the number of sign language users are available, but KAD estimates that there are 7,000-8,000 deaf people (*Report of the status of Deaf people in the Republic of Kosovo*, 2010). KosSL users live in both urban and rural regions of the country, which covers an area of about 10,908 sq km. According to the World Bank, Kosovo is one of the poorest economies in Europe. About 45% of the population **live in poverty (under €1.42 per day) and 15% live in extreme poverty (under €0.93 per day)**. Low power groups such as people who are disabled, unemployed or elderly, children, female-headed households, and non-Serb ethnic minorities, are reported to be the most vulnerable groups in terms of income poverty.



Deaf members of the sign language community can be considered as being both educationally marginalized and socially discriminated against in Kosovar society. In the project proposal that was sent to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in 2002, several disadvantages were noted. The quality of Deaf education was not satisfactory, mainly due to the fact that sign language was not used as the language of instruction. No interpreter services were available, and sign language users had no access to information in KosSL. Deaf people had no unified national-level body of interest to represent them and advocate their rights in an organised manner, and no documentation or research into KosSL had been conducted. Most Deaf people had a low level of education and lack of access to interpreting services, which diminished the opportunities for further education and employment, and formed an almost total barrier to participation in social activities, and an independent life. Scott Gibson & Shatri (2008) remark that Deaf people are among those who face the most discrimination with respect to employment in Kosovo. They also expressed their concern about the fact that health services are usually not accessible for Deaf people due to the lack of interpreters.

Consequently, the Kosovar sign language community is a marginalized linguistic minority currently taking its first wavering steps towards being recognized. However, it is a

community with an organisational history dating back to the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. During the Yugoslavian era a number of clubs and organizations of the Deaf existed, but since they were heavily hearing-lead, they did not represent the real needs of the Deaf (Scott Gibson & Shatri, 2008). Today, a relatively high number of Deaf Kosovars are members of one of the eleven regional Kosovar Deaf clubs. Nine of these are Albanian clubs and the other two (in Gracanica and Mitrovica) represent Serbian Deaf people. For political reasons, the two Kosovo-Serbian Deaf clubs have been reluctant to join the Kosovar Association of the Deaf, established in 2007, and are therefore not involved in any activities of the KAD at the moment.

These clubs are the central meeting points for community members and for the use of KosSL. In addition to adult members of the community using KosSL when attending the clubs, the language is also used among children at the Nëna Terezë deaf school in Prizren, in a few integrated classes in mainstream education, and in families with more than one Deaf member. KosSL is naturally the main language used at the KAD – both in face-to-face interaction and for electronic information-sharing with the clubs. The most recent language domain conquered is the media; from 2005 onwards a Kosovar national television company broadcasts news interpreted into KosSL for ten minutes, five days a week. The Internet is another domain

where KosSL is used, when language users are in contact with each other via a webcam.

KosSL users report that, as far as mutual intelligibility is concerned, KosSL is a close variety of the sign language used in other former Yugoslavian areas. The language users of Kosovo, however, name their language KosSL (*Gjuha e Shenjave Kosovare* in Albanian) and not Yugoslavian Sign Language. The Ethnologue (2010) continues to list Yugoslavian Sign Language as a language of Serbia. Slovenian Sign Language is given as an alternative name, and Serbian Sign Language is referred to as a dialect of the Yugoslavian Sign Language. However, it seems that after the breakup of Yugoslavia, sign languages have been renamed in most of the new states, not only in Kosovo. Croatian Sign Language, for example, is mentioned in the Ethnologue as a separate language, and there is a legal process running at the moment aiming to recognize Croatian Sign Language in law (WFD 2009a: 16). In August 2009, the parliament of the Republic of Macedonia adopted a law for the recognition of Macedonian Sign Language (WFD 2009b: 14).

In his survey on the signed languages of Eastern Europe, Bickford (2005: 15) argues that, despite some differences in regional variants, signing style and fingerspelling system, sign language users in the areas of former Yugoslavia have no problem in comprehending each other. Kosovar sign language users have reported to me that they consider Kosovo-Albanians

and Kosovo-Serbian to use the same language, even though they observe differences on the lexical level, in the manual alphabet and in mouth movements derived from spoken language. Bickford (2005: 15) reports that there was no indication of systematic linguistic studies in sign language dialectal variation in the areas of former Yugoslavia. Linguistic research had been conducted into at least two sign languages, and Deaf communities: in Croatia and Slovenia – see for example **Bradarić-Jončić & Ivasović (2004)**. In addition to the ongoing project research into KosSL, the only existing study of KosSL is Liikamaa (2009), a BA thesis producing a typological comparison of whole entity classifiers in KosSL and Finnish Sign Language.

## **4. Methods and challenges**

Over three years from 2006 I made eight trips to Kosovo, staying two or three weeks per visit.<sup>5</sup> During each visit I was actively engaged as a linguistic advisor in the everyday work that was taking place mostly at the KAD office. In this role, I was in a good position to follow the development of the language vitalization process from the inside. I also had the opportunity to carry out the present study at the same time as the ongoing project. The method for this study falls within the tradition of ethnographic participant observation used in (linguistic) anthropology (see Agar 1980, Duranti 1997, Dewalt et al. 1998). My 'insider' position had drawbacks as well as advantages. The drawbacks mainly concerned the reliability of the results, and whether I manage to achieve an acceptable degree of 'objectivity' in my academic work. The advantages consisted of the opportunity to acquire signing skills and cultural knowledge, and to familiarize myself with the activities and people involved. Being actively involved in a community, and simultaneously influencing it, is not exceptional in participatory research. As Firth (1989) points out in the second **introduction to Malinowski's Diary**, it is widely acknowledged

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<sup>5</sup> My first contact with the Kosovar sign language community was for six days in December 2002, and then for ten days in December 2005. For the period from 2009 to 2012, the position of linguistic advisor in the Kosovar project was held by the Deaf sign linguist Robert Adam.

that the position of an ethnographer does not merely include the recording of life but both affecting that life and being affected by it.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.1 Language documentation and description through dictionary work**

The goals and activities of the development project were based on a needs assessment that was carried out among members of the language community at a workshop in the town of Gjakova in 2001. The project encompasses linguistic training and language research based on sign language documentation and description, as well as organizational and management training, advocacy work, and sign language interpreter training. The research on KosSL, which had never been studied before, was determined by the needs of the language community, and is mainly applied in nature. The first stages of this research focused on the lexicon of KosSL.

The language documentation and description was included in an activity called *Sign Language Work* (SLW). In addition to lexicographical work, SLW also included other language planning activities and language training, such as sign language

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<sup>6</sup> See Dobrin (2008) for a recent discussion justifying a more active degree of involvement and participation by the field linguist within a language community in Melanesia, as compared to the traditional **Western perspective on the linguist's role as 'a neutral outsider'**.

training for interpreter students and hearing teachers at a school for the Deaf, and linguistic awareness training for members of the Deaf community. SLW was also implemented through status planning, which was **included in KAD's** campaign to lobby the Kosovar government and political decision-makers. Since Sign Language Work is a more extensive concept than simply compiling dictionaries, I will use the term SLW in this study to emphasize the multiplicity of activities that are used.

The decision to start the language documentation work by compiling a dictionary was made by the Kosovar sign language users themselves. The first part of the forthcoming dictionary will be published both in DVD and book format. The dictionary has two aims. It will be a symbol of the existence of KosSL for lobbying purposes in the on-going attempts to secure the legal recognition of KosSL, and it will be used as a learning resource for hearing interpreters, teachers and family members of the Deaf who want to learn how to sign. According to Allen & Hualand (2009: 23), these aims are in accordance with those of many sign language dictionaries made in developing countries. For endangered spoken languages, the symbolic function of a dictionary has also been central. Dictionaries provide evidence for the status of a **language as a 'real'** language, in addition to having a language preserving role (Corris et al. 2002: 330). Johnston (2003: 431) claims, however, that the main reason for making sign language

dictionaries has been to standardize the language. Even if a dictionary always has standardizing consequences and might have a considerable impact on the language, the lexicographical work on KosSL was not motivated by any overt intention to standardize the language. The aim was to document language use and to publish a description of part of the lexicon. Linguistic data for the documentation work were collected by filming KosSL users, excerpting signs, and discussing these signs in a working group consisting of Deaf signers from different parts of Kosovo. In this way the activities included both of the two characteristics mentioned by Himmelmann (2002: 9) in documenting linguistic practices: *observable linguistic behavior* and *the native speakers' metalinguistic knowledge*.

An important question to ask concerning sign language dictionaries and standardization activities is: 'Who is behind the effort?' Standardization actions (often with the aim of reducing lexical variation) have frequently been undertaken with the strong support of the hearing-run education system – from outside, often without any support from the language users **themselves. In the Kosovar case, the community's support for** the dictionary work had intrinsic value in itself. Since the primary aim of the training project was in fact to increase the linguistic skills of the participants, the concrete dictionary can be seen as a by-product. Compiling the dictionary was a learning process and a training tool for the language users to



acquire basic theoretical knowledge about their language. The ultimate aim of the work is sustainable development: when the project ends, the language users will have tools (increased linguistic knowledge and skills, and the first part of a dictionary) that enable them to continue linguistic work by themselves. A major drawback of only documenting the language by way of a dictionary is that it leaves not only grammar and syntax but also a major part of the lexicon (the non-core lexicon) outside the language description. Since sign language dictionaries in practice are mainly used for language learning, a narrow focus on the core lexicon has consequences for how sign languages are perceived by non-signers and language learners in the surrounding community.

## **4.2 A participatory approach**

Participation is crucial for ensuring the cultural validity and relevance of development projects (UNESCO 1997). Participatory development characteristically includes the concepts of empowering the population and including members in decision-making throughout the process (Schneider & Libercier 1995: 10). The Kosovar project was implemented as a joint project between two NGOs representing sign language users with a spelled-out participatory approach. In order to achieve empowerment, local language users of the Kosovar

sign language community need to be able to present their own realities and influence policy-making themselves. In his discussion on policy-related participatory research methods, Chambers (1998: 197–198) examines two critical links in the process of empowerment when the community strives to become an active player in decision-making. Both of these links are also relevant to the Kosovar process. The first is the link from getting **one's** voice heard to policy change, and the second one is from policy into practice. The ongoing SLW has a strong focus on training language users so that they will be able to confront the decision-makers in the process of gaining linguistic human rights. This work will then be the basis for the further steps of putting new policy into practice. That is, participation is both a means and a development objective. This implies, as Vainio-Mattila (2000: 436–437) points out, that development interventions are always political. When striving for goals such as human rights, the aim is to effect change.

*Action Research* is a participatory approach with a spelled-out goal to advance both practice and theory. This empirical method which is commonly applied in social science research and education aims at development and causing a change in a desirable direction (see e.g. Somekh 2006). According to Friedrichs & Lüdtke (1975: 88–89) the researcher is not restricted to a participatory observer's role in action research. *Participatory action research* (Wadsworth 1998) and

*empowerment/empowering research* (Cameron et al. 1992, Yamada 2007) are both examples of community-based research approaches that apply interactive methodology and take the agenda of the community into account when setting up research goals. One of the aims in this kind of research is to create a relationship of equality between the researcher and the community partners involved in the study. In this regard the current study conducted within a development co-operation project frame shares characteristics of action research.

The success or failure of a development co-operation project is influenced by many different factors. These can be both project-external factors, such as the political situation in the country of implementation, and internal factors such as project organisation and clarity of goals. However, the Kosovar project clearly indicates the great significance of specific factors that influence implementation at grassroots level, where individuals meet.

For the work to be successful, the approach must therefore use methods that enhance partnership, and emphasize the cross-cultural and communicative skills of the participants, both community members and outside advisors involved in the work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The list of criteria provided by Vasko, Kjsik & Salo-Lee (1998: 122) for a good cooperation partner is lengthy. It includes, among other **things, language proficiency, professionalism in one's area of expertise, willingness to learn, intercultural sensitivity, making an**

Sign Language Work is conducted in the spirit of genuine participation with the aim of capacity-building: the development of human resources (i.e. learning) is the primary goal whereas the concrete outcome of the work (e.g. a dictionary) is secondary. However, it is important to keep in mind the requirements of the donor concerning indicators used for measuring the progress and showing the success of project activities. It is therefore necessary to achieve a balance between efficient learning results and visible language documentation and description outcomes. Tangible results such as a dictionary are easier to assess than learning processes and changes in linguistic attitude. The aim of SLW is sustainable development, and the expected outcome of the work is local acquisition of skills so that the community, in the long run, will become empowered and independent of outside support from Finland. However, it is not intended that the community will continue sign language research or provide language classes and interpreter training on their own at an NGO level, isolated from the Kosovar public institutions. Therefore advocacy activities – lobbying the Kosovar government to assume responsibilities – are an important part of the project. One of

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effort to understand other people, good knowledge of the local history, being open-minded and open-hearted, being pragmatic and flexible, the ability to understand different ways of thinking, and a high level of moral and personal integrity.

the aim is to find a partner for sign language research at a linguistics department in a Kosovar university.

Linguistic research through participatory methods was chosen as the approach of the project in order to achieve local ownership and sustainability. In practice, this meant that two Deaf community members, Nebih and Drita, were trained in language documentation and description.<sup>8</sup> They learned how to collect data through videotaped interviews with language users in the different regions of Kosovo, how to analyze the video data on the lexical level (i.e. excerpt signs), and how to depict the excerpted signs according to their structure on sign files. Community ownership does not, however, emerge by only working with individuals. One of the crucial differences between working *with* and not *on* a sign language community is that the former involves the community of Deaf language users in the project. The community was involved in the dictionary work in different ways. Thirty-eight sign language users from the nine regional Kosovar Deaf clubs were videotaped in order to collect a representative sample of linguistic data. All nine regional clubs were represented in the working group that was established to support the two research assistants in their work on the dictionary. The working group members received basic linguistic training and they will all become sign language models in the sign entries in the forthcoming DVD dictionary.

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<sup>8</sup> Nebih Cakaj and Drita Toprlak were chosen from several applicants through an interview and testing process.

The project faced several challenges. Restricted financial resources limited the scope of the project and reduced the initial investment and technology available for the dictionary work. The restricted amount of time constrained comprehension of the lexical description and also limited the amount of linguistic training that was given to the language users involved in the project. Furthermore, the gender balance, which was a factor emphasized by the funder at all levels of the project, was hard to achieve due to the male culture of the Balkans. Compromises had to be made at all levels, which as Mosel (2004: 51) points out, is generally the case when compiling a dictionary for under-researched languages. However, from my perspective as an advisor, the main challenges were co-operating with the language community, and the question of language use during the process.

### **4.3 The relationship between the language community and the outside advisor – attitudes and co-operation**

One of my major concerns as a linguistic advisor was the relationship between myself, a hearing linguist from Finland, and the Kosovar sign language community. Östman (2000) **discusses the outsider linguist's** ethical dilemmas when conducting research on the language of indigenous people or in

sign language communities. He notes that the researcher has an ethical and moral responsibility to become acquainted with the primary data. Östman (2000: 40) suggests that this can be done 'either by **lifting up the "object of study"** from underneath **one's magnifying glass and placing it/him/her next to oneself in one's chair** or sofa, or by joining it/him/her under the **magnifying glass**'.

My role as a linguistic advisor gave me the opportunity to join the core of the community under the magnifying glass. By actively being involved in planning, organizing and giving training on implementing the SLW, I participated in the work, as mentioned above, both as an advisor and as a researcher. However, my everyday role was mostly to give advice and be involved in discussions about possible options, leaving it to community members to make the final decisions and take charge of operational activities. This is also in accordance with good practice in developmentally relevant North-South collaboration in general. Kealey & Protheroe (1995: 33) state that there have been efforts to re-orient technical cooperation, so that the expatriates (e.g. advisors) do less direct task-performance and focus instead mainly on training, advising and facilitating. They recommend the external advisor to aim at a relationship between equals and become 'more an advisor than a doer' (1995: 43). The SLW in Kosovo was implemented almost entirely by the language users themselves. The research

assistants Nebih and Drita were responsible for all phases of documenting the linguistic data, and were also encouraged to take an active role in their relation to the working group. Teaching linguistic issues to the group (which the research assistants themselves had only recently learned) both reinforced their own learning process and also provided a way of gaining the trust of the members of the group for the dictionary work that they were conducting.

An open attitude and an ability to communicate respect are key factors in co-operation between an outside linguistic advisor and sign language community members. Newman & Ratliff (2001) point out that this also holds more generally in modern field studies – contrary to the situation in the dark history of field studies, when the discourse was dominated by the linguist, and the role and input of language community members were left in the shade. Ethical perspectives on linguistic field studies are discussed in all recent publications and guides on field linguistics and language documentation (e.g. Gippert, Himmelmann & Mosel 2006, Crowley 2007, Bowerman 2008). Dwyer (2006: 32) states that co-operation with language users is emphasized in modern field work methods: there has been a paradigm shift from ‘research *on* a community’ to ‘research *on, for, and with* a community’. Rice (2001: 233) speaks about *cooperative fieldwork* as opposed to *linguist-centered fieldwork*. Huss (2006: 584–587) gives a good



overview of recent discussion among linguists concerning the role and responsibilities of the linguist in language documentation on endangered languages. Several tricky ethical questions also arose from the SLW. These varied from questions about general ethically correct research methods, to practical questions concerning how to obtain consent for video filming, and who has access to the collected data (see also Harris et al. 2009 for a general discussion on research ethics in sign language communities).

From my point of view, the most pervasive issue was the **'white man's burden'** – to be aware of oppression by outsider **hearing** 'experts' which sign language communities have experienced and still are experiencing. Since I am hearing and do not have a Deaf family background (neither Deaf parents, siblings, nor other relatives) which would have authorized my role within a sign language community, I was aware that my attitude was critical as I strove to gain the trust of members of the Kosovar sign language community. To win the confidence of the community it is necessary to be familiar with, and show genuine interest in the values, beliefs, patterns, social customs and history of *Deaf culture* that expresses a common Deaf identity and is put into practice through use of sign language. According to sign language users themselves, Deaf communities are best constructed using a cultural-linguistic model, and the experience of oppression is similar to other

linguistic minorities (Ladd 2003: 268). Thanks to my previous involvement with sign language communities in Finland and Albania, I was able to establish a relationship with the Kosovar sign language users built upon friendship and trust.

Kealey & Protheroe (1995) list three major categories of skills that are needed for collaboration across cultures: cross-cultural skills, adaption skills, and partnership skills. I found the culturally multi-layered and complex working environment to be a particular challenge in the Kosovar project. Clashes between Deaf and hearing culture, Nordic and Balkan culture and various subcultures, such as different working backgrounds, were inevitable. The advisors for the organisational support and interpreter training were from Australia, so differences in working methods surfaced on a daily basis. It is vital to be constantly alert and culturally sensitive when trying to cope with different social behaviours and conceptions of how to use time efficiently,<sup>9</sup> how to prioritize tasks, and so on. Against all the odds, the daily interaction among people involved in SLW turned out to be relatively flexible. This was largely due to the prevailing atmosphere of respect and trust that manifested itself in smoothly flowing sign language communication.

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<sup>9</sup> Vasko, Kjisik & Salo-Lee (1998: 84) mention that relation to time among the people involved in Finnish development cooperation is one of the most significant cultural differences influencing intercultural communication between Finnish people and the local partners.

#### **4.4 Learning the (local sign) language**

In order to secure efficient communication between the outsider linguist and members of the sign language community, the linguist has to acquire language skills in the local sign language. At the beginning of the SLW I was fortunate to be able to work with Florjan Rojba, an Albanian Deaf person who had received training in sign language dictionary work, and with whom I had worked in a similar project in the neighboring country Albania. Both of us were involved as linguistic advisors in the SLW in Kosovo at the very beginning, so I could rely on Florjan for language support, with Albanian Sign Language (AlbSL) as our common language. Even though KosSL and AlbSL are not mutually intelligible, Florjan acquired KosSL faster than I did. His cultural background as a Deaf Balkan signer was hugely beneficial for efficient communication and for the project. In fact, people such as Florjan are the best possible advisors for similar future projects. However, as long as there are no trained indigenous linguists available, it is justifiable to use hearing linguists as advisors in projects of this kind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>My existing language skills in other sign languages greatly supported my acquisition of a new sign language. In fact, I found myself accepted in the sign language community due to my willingness to learn KosSL and my gradual acquisition of KosSL. This surpassed my shortcomings: that I was a hearing person, with limited skills in Albanian, that I was neither Muslim nor of Balkan origin, and that I was an unmarried woman over 30 on the still strongly male-dominated Balkan Peninsula.

To rely on sign language interpreters on a daily basis is not feasible, and in many (developing) countries skilled interpreters simply do not exist.

I totally concur with Östman (2000) that it is the responsibility of the researcher to learn the language as part of her or his professional ethical conduct. As regards to sign language use, the World Federation of the Deaf has an explicit policy on cooperation between Deaf associations in developing and developed countries. The WFD policy says that ‘The objective should not be to export the sign language of the developed countries, but for developing countries to research and/or develop their own sign languages based on cultural **realities**’. The issue of language influence is of high relevance since in the early days of developmental work among Deaf communities, the sign language of the donor country was sometimes exported to the recipient country. For example, in some west and central African countries, American Sign Language is acknowledged and used in Deaf education, while the national sign language does not have official status (Allen & Haualand 2009; see also Chapter 2).

Malinowski, one of the founders of modern social anthropology, stressed in his diary of 1914 – and in his early works – the importance of learning the language of the Trobriand Islanders in focus in his studies (1989 [1967], 1978 [1922]). Learning the language of the community is also

encouraged in modern linguistic fieldwork. Newman & Ratliff (2001: 4–6) report that many experienced field linguists urge other linguists to gain language proficiency in the language of their study. The benefits are manifold: language skills contribute to fieldwork success and make it easier for the community to accept the linguist. According to the experience of Hale (2001: 81–82), an efficient strategy for documenting a language is to proceed as you would if you were going to learn the language. Everett (2001: 186–187) discusses a central reason for the linguist to gain language skills that is also of high relevance in sign language communities: communication in the language of the community reduces the power-differential between the linguist and the language users. As a result, the two parties become socially more equal.

The Kosovar case demonstrates that the following quotation from Kealey & Protheroe (1995: 89) is accurate not only for common North-South co-operation but also for the partnership between an outside hearing linguistic advisor (Northern partner) and the sign language community (Southern partner):

This research [on North-South partnerships] indicates that the most important aspects of such collaborative **relationships are the northern partner's cross-cultural communication skills and knowledge of the local history, culture and language, the host country partner's commitment to learning, and the degree to which gaps in income and lifestyle between the two are permitted to foster distrust and disharmony.** Of course,

technical expertise is also a requirement for effective N[orth]-S[outh] partnerships, but the most surprising conclusion of the research is that lack of technical expertise is rarely identified as a cause for failure. When things go wrong it is far more often due to personal incompatibilities or lack of interaction skills.

When examining intercultural communication in Finnish development cooperation work, Vasko, Kjisik & Salo-Lee (1998: 113, 137) point out that low foreign language proficiency has been one of the major barriers in the cooperation. In their study they are struck by the lack of even some basic knowledge **of the partner's language**. By contrast, they notice convincing results when people working on international assignments do learn the language of the local community – in e.g. NGOs that have a spelled-out language policy encouraging learning the local language. According to them, this kind of language policy leads to higher engagement, better results, and long-standing relations. They also found that the strength of NGO work is often based on informal contacts at grassroots level (1998: 63). Fruitful communication usually takes place informally.

#### **4.5 Languages used in the SLW – written language and metalanguage**

KosSL was the daily language of interaction in the project and it was used as a metalanguage in the documentation and

description process. As my language skills increased I became less dependent on Florjan's language support. At some point, in order to avoid being strained by communicating in too many different signed languages at the same time, Florjan and I actually stopped using AlbSL as our common language, and changed to KosSL whenever we worked in Kosovo.<sup>11</sup>

There were other languages involved in the work as well. Because sign languages lack an established and widespread written form, one is obliged to use another language, i.e. the written form of a spoken language for written communication and for taking notes. Members of sign language communities are therefore all more or less bilingual, and the second language, taught in school when learning to read and write, is usually the language of the surrounding community. In Kosovo the language of schooling in deaf education has changed several times over the past few decades. According the Deaf staff at the KAD, prior to the 1970s this language was Serbian (named Serbo-Croatian during the Yugoslavian era), and from

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<sup>11</sup> I sometimes travelled from Kosovo straight to Albania to work on a similar project there. As Florjan and I boarded the aeroplane in Prishtina we switched back to AlbSL. I found it challenging to change the language in use with the same person depending on our physical location, but there was no other option – not least since one of my main language policy messages for the Balkan sign language communities was to be aware of their own language use and to respect their own language. In the Albania sign language community I observed tendencies to abandon indigenous linguistic expressions in favour of foreign ones, which were regarded as having higher prestige (see Hoyer, 2007).

the 1970s until 1990 both Serbian and Albanian were used. From 1990 onwards the political situation in Kosovo made the language issue highly critical. Until the war in 1999 there was a system of parallel schools for hearing students, and in Deaf education both languages were used. Since 1999 the language in Deaf education has been Albanian (see Sommers & Buckland 2004, Bartlett et al. 2004, and Landsman & Maloku-Berdyna 2010 on education and special education in Kosovo). This meant in practice that the second language of sign language users depended on when the person had attended school.

It was decided that Albanian would be the written metalanguage in SLW since Albanian was the main spoken and written language in use in the KAD, and in Kosovo in general after its independence. Nebih and Drita, who had the main responsibility for SLW, had learned different languages at school (Albanian and Serbian, respectively). However, because sign language was not used in Deaf education, the skills acquired in the written language of the surrounding community were generally poor among Kosovar Deaf people (*Report of the status of Deaf people in the Republic of Kosovo*, 2010). This fact, together with my own limited skills in Albanian, was an extra challenge for the project. I had acquired basic Albanian thanks to my prior sign language dictionary work in Albania, but my knowledge was heavily vocabulary-based. In the Kosovar work we used written Albanian for linguistic descriptions and



remarks about the excerpted signs on the sign files in addition to the Hamburg Notation System symbols that were used for phonetic transcription of the handshape of the sign. Since I did not have any full written language in common with Nebih and Drita, our email communication during the intervals when I was not present in Kosovo was mainly dependent on a KosSL-English-KosSL interpreter on the spot at the KAD office.<sup>12</sup>

Language documentation and description is possible even when a language does not have a written form. The same holds true for dictionary work, language vitalization, and community empowerment programs. Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 62–63) give attention to the widespread belief that a crucial factor for the success of any language program is literacy. However, the successful Master-Apprentice programs in Californian indigenous language communities are based on the oral nature of the communities. Recent technical developments have meant the expansion of sign language use into new domains. Webcams make sign communication at a distance possible and has made a common written language less necessary. Through

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<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, we did not let our restricted skills in Albanian language hinder us from taking a creative approach towards **communicating at a distance. We created our own private 'pidgin'**, where Albanian words mainly in citation form were used with KosSL sign order. For sms, short emails, and to-do lists of tasks to be undertaken before my next trip (complemented with drawn sketches), this turned out to be an excellent means of communication suitable for our needs.

video conferencing programs such as Skype and Oovoo, Nebih, Drita and I were able to communicate online in KosSL across Europe.

The project turned out to be a golden opportunity to activate my own language skills. In addition to KosSL and AlbSL I had to use many other languages. I improved my Albanian language skills, and English was the lingua franca I used with hearing participants in the project (both with Kosovar people and international advisors). English was also the written language for project reporting. I used spoken Finnish with the project co-ordinator Inkeri Lahtinen in Finland, and Finnish Sign Language with Arttu Liikamaa from Finland, who volunteered as a trainer in the project for six weeks during the spring of 2008. In fact, it was only my mother tongue, Swedish, that was not used explicitly within the project. However, I am convinced that my experiences of belonging to a linguistic minority myself (speaking Swedish in Finland) strongly contributed to my relatively flexible adjustment to the new surroundings, and my understanding of the minority situation of the sign language users of Kosovo.

## **5. Findings and the impact of the project**

The data for this study were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The topics (presented in Appendix 3) ranged from language attitudes, language use and personal experience of language documentation and description work, to the impact of the project. Data were not collected until three years after the SLW began. In many ways it was an advantage to collect the interview and focus group discussion data at this late point, rather than during the implementation of the project. Firstly, I acquired relatively fluent language skills in KosSL during these three years, which enabled me to communicate with Deaf interviewees. Secondly, the people involved in the project who participated in the interviews and focus group discussions had had time to evaluate the effects of the work. Thirdly, and most importantly, the discussion topics had crystallized in the course of my involvement in the project.

The topics chosen for the interviews and discussions reflect the participant observation method, since the topics were related to questions that emerged during the years of my participation in the project. Dewalt et al. (1998: 264–265) discuss the advantages of participant observation: the method enhances the quality of the data collected, and also increases the quality of the interpretation of the data. They also observe that the degree of ‘participation’ and ‘observation’ vary from

researcher to researcher within the method of participant observation (1998: 262–263). On account of the participatory nature of this study, I consider interviews and discussions to be self-evident methods of data collection. Additionally, Agar (1980: 109–111) considers interviews as the core source of data, and gives observation a supplementary role, even though observations and interviews mutually interact in fieldwork.

The video interviews with four Deaf KAD office staff members and the focus group discussion with four Deaf working group members were conducted in KosSL. The interviews were filmed from the front, with two interviewees in one frame. The setting for the focus group discussion required a moving camera technique focusing on each signer in turn. Since KosSL does not have a written form, I have translated the signed data into English for the quotations in this study. Interviews with the two hearing office staff members were conducted in English, and the quotes are transcriptions from the video interviews.<sup>13</sup> The focus group discussion with the school teachers was not recorded. It included English-Albanian and Albanian-English interpreting, and the quotes are given here in free translation based on my written notes.

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<sup>13</sup> In this interview Seman Hoti had a double role; in addition to being interviewed as a KAD office staff member he was also interpreting English-Albanian and Albanian-English between Rukije Gashi and me. The quotations by Selman Hoti and Rukije Gashi have been slightly edited for English expressions, in order to be as fluent as possible.

The findings presented here deal with six themes that emerged as more salient than others in the course of analyzing the data. These themes are: (1) raised language awareness; (2) the involvement of the community; (3) Deaf role models as part of sign language community empowerment; (4) language documentation and description – the core activity for sign language vitalization and community empowerment; (5) methods used in SLW on a daily basis; and (6) successful sign language training for hearing teachers at Prizren school. I am aware that these six themes partly overlap, and can be categorized in different ways; some are more methodological in nature and some are results of the process. What they have in common is that they are all either prerequisites or indicators of successful sign language vitalization and community empowerment, and their importance as such should be noted.

### **5.1 Raised language awareness**

One of the most prominent impacts of SLW was heightened language awareness and raised consciousness of sign language status and sign language use. One definition of language awareness within language learning discussed by James and Garrett (1991: 4) is: '**Language Awareness is a person's** sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life'. Later in his cross-linguistic

approach, James (1996: 139–141) distinguishes between *language awareness* ('the possession of metacognitions about language in general, some bit of language, or a particular language over which one already has skilled control and a coherent set of intuitions') and *consciousness-raising* (an 'activity that develops the ability to locate and identify the **discrepancy between one's present state of knowledge and a goal state of knowledge**').

Prior to the project, even the users of KosSL did not see the language as a natural language equal to spoken languages such as the Albanian used by the hearing community. As they received linguistic training, the sign language users began to reflect on their **own and others'** language use and learned to talk about language. Some comments on how the project had changed the opinion about KosSL among the interpreters, the office staff of the KAD, the research assistants, the SLW group members, and the hearing teachers who received sign language training, include the following:

Yes, it has changed a lot. It has changed a lot, starting from me. Because, really, I thought I knew the sign language. Also a lot of change happened to the Deaf community, so we have all changed, the interpreters, and the community itself.

- Rukije Gashi (hearing KAD advocacy officer) -

**Rukije's comment was followed** by the following comment from Selman:

I agree with Rukije that [...] the sign language work has changed the opinion of the people, starting from us. Because we were not clear about what sign language really is. And we thought sign language is poor, because we could not find signs for a word or something like that. [...] And I just want to add that the hearing people, the society, and even the Deaf people are more aware about sign language. And maybe they started to realize that their language does not only mean like moving their hands – making some – like moving around with their hands, but when they realize and when they [...]. I have this experience with Deaf people here, they were saying like, having this 'Ahaa! This is different!' like when they had the training about the movement and about the placement; the structure of the sign – this basic information – they were just very surprised [...]. After that maybe they were very proud that their sign language *has* meaning, *is* a language.

- Selman Hoti (hearing KAD interpreter trainer) -

Before the establishment of the sign language working group I did not think that research was of any importance. Then [...] we got all this new information from the two research assistants and the two advisors. I was really amazed that sign language really is equal to spoken language. Research has been published on sign languages! All the information I learned was really interesting – therefore I have been supportive and very eager in my role as a volunteer.

- Faton Parduzi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

Before the training, I thought that I knew sign language. But through the training I realized that I did not.

- Hearing teacher at Nëna Terezë school in Prizren -

The linguistic training given to the research assistants and to the SLW group included an introduction to basic concepts in (sign) linguistics, information about the linguistic structure of signed languages, and a comparison of these structures to those of spoken and written languages.<sup>14</sup> However, the purpose of the training was not only to introduce linguistic information but also to make language users aware of their intuitions about KosSL. James and Garrett (1991: 5) consider this kind of language awareness training as 'providing a means to bridge the *consciousness gap* within the individual'. The following quote from Drita shows that as a result of the training and research, intuitive and implicit knowledge of sign language was raised to consciousness and became explicit:

Before – I knew how to sign, but I did not think sign language was important [...]. Then I started the work here, together with the advisors Karin and Florjan. They taught a lot of things that made sense but I had not realized before. Through examples that we found in our sign language research I started to see that sign language has variation and that this is perfectly okay.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

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<sup>14</sup> The spoken/written language that was used for comparison was Albanian, the language that the Kosovar sign language users knew at least to some extent. My own limited knowledge of Albanian restricted the depth of the training on this specific topic, and I mostly used isolated example sentences and phrases in the comparisons.



Heightened language awareness manifested itself in the increased tolerance of linguistic variation in the working group:

Before we got involved in this training I thought sign language is the same in the whole of Kosovo. But due to the training I started to observe the variation in the language. It is the same as for hearing people - spoken language also varies. Both signed and spoken languages have variation.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

I was aware that spoken language has variation, and that sentence structure can vary. But I had never thought that sign language had variation – it was just ‘signing’ to me. When we started to have the working group meetings the Deaf group members thought that we needed to choose just one sign for each word and that there should not be any variation [...]. Then the group got training and have now changed their opinion – they respect that there might be several different signs for the same thing. Before there was an intolerant attitude and those who signed differently were almost discriminated against and accused of making up signs.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

I was witnessing how the first step in the process was the discussion about language variation, that you should respect different ways of signing. People sign differently in cities and in regions in the countryside. There was a lot of arguing around this topic in the first meetings, people accused each other of signing wrongly. There were tense feelings, but then it calmed down. Both myself and the president [of the board of the KAD] who were present in the meetings could see a change in the attitude of the working group members. People started to accept variation and feel at ease in the meetings. The arguing vanished and there is more

respect for **each other's language today** – it is so much better.

- Enver Kurtalani (Deaf KAD project administrator) -

The quotes from the sign language users in this study reflect many of the different interrelated domains of language awareness put forward by James and Garrett (1991): the affective domain (about attitudes towards languages and language learning and use), the social domain (about **awareness of one's own origin and place on the map of languages**), the power domain (about developing sensitivity towards power related to language use), the cognitive domain (about cognitive advantages following the ability to reflect upon language), and the performance domain (a heightened language awareness may potentially result in an improved command of the language). It is clear that language awareness rose and linguistic self-esteem in the Kosovar case developed as a result of linguistic research and training. This improved awareness is the foundation for all further skills development.

## **5.2 The involvement of the community**

The involvement of the sign language community in the linguistic work was seen as crucial. This was partly caused by lessons learned from a short-term project (prior to SLW) on signs in KosSL, resulting in the publication *Broshura e Gjuhës së*

*Shenjave* (2002). This publication was rejected by the community. There were several reasons as to why this publication did not meet with approval, but one of the central reasons was that the work was conducted without the extensive involvement of the language community:

The response among the Deaf community was not very positive, we had a lot of problems [...]. The current research project is so much better. It is done in co-operation with the working group, we pay attention to linguistic variation – different signing among younger and older signers, women and men.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Yes, it was the first time for us, we did not have any information. The team was just put together, but they did not get any training or practice. So I think it is very understandable that it went as it did, and I want to respect the people who were involved. It was a first step. The team was deciding on the signs themselves, and did not have a group representing the whole community involved. Signs were just put into the book, and a lot of conflicts were created when the book was published. Deaf community members did not think that the book represented their language, and accused the three Deaf people who compiled the book. [...] Now having the advisor working with the two research assistants makes me pleased, it is so much better when we have a working group where the whole community is represented.

- Enver Kurtalani (Deaf KAD project administrator) -

It is so much better to have all 11 clubs represented compared to having only some involved, say five or six. This is because it would create such arguments if some clubs were not represented and their language use not

included. It is fair that all clubs are represented in the SLW group [...]. As for the two Serbian clubs not attending, we just have to wait and respect their decision to join us or not.

- Faton Parduži (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

Sign language work is very important and has very good objectives. [...] The most important thing is that the Deaf community is involved.

- Rukije Gashi (hearing KAD advocacy officer) -

In a dictionary project on Jicarilla Apache, Axelrod et al. (2003) found parallels between compiling dictionaries of endangered Native American languages, and sign language dictionary work. In addition to similarities due to the polysynthetic structure of these languages, there is the aspect of power and identity in working with minority languages. Axelrod et al. (2003: 317–318) note that the responsibility of representing and speaking for the whole community can cause individual language consultants to feel anxious. Instead of having only a small circle of speakers involved, the linguists addressed the need for wider community participation in the production of a dictionary.

Frawley et al. (2002: 12–13) find the role of the community of native speakers in dictionary making in the European-American tradition as standing in marked contrast to its role in the making of Native American language dictionaries. The users of Western languages are not directly represented in the compilation of a dictionary – since dictionaries are compiled by

teams of trained lexicographers, area experts and based partly on corpus data – whereas the language community has an active and necessary role in the compilation of dictionaries for the indigenous languages of Americas. Similar active community involvement is also an absolute prerequisite for sign language dictionary work as long as there is no extensive corpus available. The involvement of representatives of the community in sign language vitalization activities for gaining ownership is therefore a key factor. According to Karttunen (2000: 33), this holds true for efforts focusing on endangered languages in general: ‘Time and again the most effective workers have proved to be committed members of the local community who have received **training in linguistics**’.

### **5.3 Deaf role models as part of sign language community empowerment**

The low levels of language awareness among sign language users in the Kosovar sign language community prior to the project was unfortunate, but expected. One reason for this can be found in the break in language transmission from one generation to the next. In the *Report of the status of the Deaf people in the Republic of Kosovo* (2010) it is observed that an overwhelming majority of 88% of survey respondents did not learn sign language until the age of seven or later. This means,

among other things, that signing skills, Deaf cultural identity and linguistic role models do not usually come from within the biological family; instead, the child finds them elsewhere. One of the probable consequences of this situation, combined with misconceptions about sign language that prevail in the surrounding community, might be that the signer does not even consider signing to be a language. Just how negative the impact caused by the low status of signed languages can be is apparent in the opening quote of this study. Nebih is from an all-Deaf family, but he still did not realize that he and his family use a proper language. Having said that, the benefits of having a Deaf family are frequently apparent in the Kosovar data:

When you compare being a Deaf child in a Deaf family to a hearing family, with Deaf parents you learn to sign at home. Hearing parents do not have enough information about Deaf people, they might try to force the child to speak and prevent the child from signing since they feel signing is embarrassing. There are no communication problems in a Deaf family like there are in a hearing one.

- Elma Hasani (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

I have hearing parents. I would have been so much happier if I had been able to sign with them when I was a little girl.

- Kimete Haziri (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

For sign language users, Deaf role models are essential in the process of forming an identity. Breivik (2005) studied the forming of identity among Norwegian Deaf people, and observed that Deaf people often feel connected to other Deaf people in other parts of the world. When struggling for an identity in a hearing-dominated context, the experiences that Deaf people share with each other, and the ease of signed communication, contributes to mutual identification. Breivik (2005: 15, 185) argues that members of the Norwegian Deaf community are part of transnational bonding practices, and the sense of global connectedness is strengthened by intense contact both face-to-face and through the internet. A strong sense of belonging emerges at transnational Deaf events. When discussing what Deaf people as a minority can offer or teach the hearing majority, Drita and Nebih noted the transnational aspect of being Deaf:

When hearing people think of Deaf people they do not necessarily realize how important our communication in sign language is for us. And that the Deaf are a minority like other language minorities of Kosovo, in the same way as in other countries of the world. [...] I remember when I met Deaf people from other countries; it was not a problem that they used a different language. By gestures and our visual signing I could communicate with them. Hearing people had more problems; if they did not know English, they had difficulties in communicating. We Deaf have it so much easier in international contexts, when foreigners visit us here or when we travel abroad [...]. At international

events it just takes a few days to adjust and then you have no communication problems.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

There is also a difference in culture. When two hearing people from different countries meet they do not interact very intensely and they keep a distance between each other. When we Deaf people meet, we immediately get a good contact and feel much more familiar with each other.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is the central international organization of national associations of Deaf people worldwide. The WFD has consultative status in United Nations systems, and also has a high status among its member associations. In conjunction with one of its board meetings, the WFD arranged a two-day workshop in Prishtina in March 2006. The topic of the workshop was *Democracy for Deaf people* and the presentations dealt with issues of human rights and sign languages. Many members of the Kosovar sign language community attended the workshop, which was an unforgettable experience, as the data reveal:

It was the first time that the WFD board had come to Kosovo. Many Deaf people attended the workshop. It had such an impact on us Deaf people to see Deaf people like ourselves stand up and give presentations! It was a really strong and positive experience. They were like role models for us to live up to [...]. It would not have been so fascinating for the audience to listen to hearing presenters, but they were all Deaf!! They talked about how important sign language is, and that



Deaf people are qualified and should be involved in everything: as interpreters, as trainers, at the university, and on TV.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

When I heard about WFD coming I thought that all the leaders and presenters would be hearing people. I was so amazed that they were all Deaf! They were skilled, had power and communication skills. [...] After the workshop I remember thinking at home that Deaf people really can do anything, be high presidents and secretaries. It was great to see – we do not need hearing people to do things for us – we can do it ourselves! So I really thank WFD for coming here and for their support.

- Faton Parduzi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

When I heard about this international event I did not know what to expect. I went to the workshop and I was impressed and felt emotional because of the presentations and everything they said: that teachers in the Deaf school could be Deaf themselves, and that we could achieve higher positions. And everybody was signing! [...] It was such a good experience.

- Kimete Haziri (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

I used to think that only hearing people could achieve higher positions – and never we Deaf people. And then all these international Deaf people with high professions visited Kosovo. They had Dr. and other titles. I really felt respect for them and thought that we Deaf can also do things. We can study and become equal to hearing people. [...] We are as capable as anybody, we sign, we see. And I thought we can do research, we can become doctors, we can sit on

boards. It means we really can become equal in the future!

- Liridon Gashi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

The impact of an international workshop of this kind is immeasurable. More than three years after the event, every Deaf person interviewed expressed strong and emotive language to describe what an overwhelming experience the workshop had been. Deaf people started to realize that equality with hearing people is possible. It is of the utmost importance to have Deaf role models in sign language community empowerment. To have (international) Deaf advisors and trainers such as Florjan Rojba involved in project activities on a daily basis is a priority and of value in itself. As stated in the needs analysis by the Council of Europe (Krausneker 2008: 36), 'Nobody knows more about the needs of Deaf sign language users than Deaf people themselves. Self-determination of Deaf sign language users should be supported: Financial matters, decision-making processes, publications etc. that are of relevance to the sign language community should be carried out in co-operation **with or solely by Deaf experts**'.

Even though macro-level issues, such as legislation and policies, on an extra-national level are often overlooked, they can, according to Grenoble & Whaley (2006: 22–23), be strong forces in social change. The influences that neighbouring countries can have on each other is one example: communities

in one country can draw ideas from legislation and communities in another country. The Kosovar case shows that within sign language communities the activities and the role of the WFD can, in language vitalization, be seen as an extra-national variable of the kind that Grenoble & Whaley discuss. The WFD is an international role model for sign language communities to copy as regards awareness raising and linguistic advocacy matters.

#### **5.4 Language documentation and description – the core of sign language vitalization and community empowerment**

It has to be emphasized that SLW was not conducted in isolation. It was part of a bigger project where the other main activities were organizational and management training, advocacy work and interpreter training.<sup>15</sup> One of the most visible outcomes of organizational capacity building was the establishment of a peak organization for the Kosovar Deaf community. The first general election meeting of the Kosovar Association of the Deaf was held in March 2007. The positive

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<sup>15</sup> The reason for the decision to begin SLW three years *after* the start of the organizational and advocacy training was that there were basic organizational and management skills that needed to be acquired first. Only after the staff and the board had acquired the needed organizational skills, built up good relations, and felt comfortable with running a project, was the time right starting the linguistic work.

experience and process of setting up a nationwide association run by Deaf people themselves was also noted in the interview data:

Before, in our clubs, the secretaries and presidents were all hearing. Deaf people did not have any control. We were discriminated against in our own organizations. Through this project there has been a huge change – all involved are Deaf, our leaders, the SLW research team, the president, everybody. It is such a relief and so much better. All the discrimination is gone and we do not have any communicational problems among ourselves whatsoever! We are supporting each other – it is so much better nowadays.

- Faton Parduži (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

We were discriminated against by hearing people. They did all the activity planning, signed our documents and did practically everything in our names and we did not have a clue about what was going on. Now we have information and are in charge ourselves [...]. We have Deaf office staff [...] and we are all aware of the goals of our organization.

- Elma Hasani (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

As part of the project, SLW had a central role, not least in the process of improving the status of KosSL at a governmental level – both within a national strategy plan for people with disabilities, and in the ongoing sign language recognition process. The KAD has actively been lobbying for legal recognition of KosSL, and involved in a governmental process for updating the Kosovar legislation so that it will be in

accordance with the forthcoming language recognition and with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The KAD has arranged workshops in April 2007, May 2009, and March 2010, in co-operation with the Office for Good Governance at the Kosovar Prime Minister's Office, for promoting the status of Deaf people and the language recognition process. In 2006, the Prime Minister's Office established a working group with representatives of relevant ministries, educational institutes, universities, and sign language users, which was tasked with preparing for the recognition of sign language.

Responses during the interview acknowledge a connection between the SLW and its consequences on different levels, such as attitudinal change, the recognition of KosSL, improved public services, and equal opportunities for sign language users:

Hearing people look down on us – we are not equal in their eyes. They underestimate the importance of sign language. We just have to live with their attitudes. But I think that, along with the dictionary and the recognition of sign language, we will reach hearing people and they will gain understanding. Since the majority of them here in Kosovo do not have high thoughts of us and are unfamiliar with sign language.

- Faton Parduži (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

The legal recognition of sign language is important. It is connected with employment, with school, with service provision, with interpreters, and with other

things like family. Everything is connected to the recognition of sign language in the law.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Many Deaf people are unemployed. If we get our right to sign language services recognized in the legislation, it means we can have access to education and training and in that way we will be able to find jobs. This would mean a decrease of unemployment among the Deaf.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Hinton (2001a: 7–13) provides an overview of different approaches to language revitalization. There are school-based and home-based programs, and some of the programs are adult language programs while others are directed at children and take place after school. The category of programs with most parallels to the Kosovar case is the one on documentation and materials development. Hinton (2001a: 12) considers language documentation and the development of materials to be an important component of language teaching. In Kosovo there was an explicit need to acquire basic information about the language, so that it could be taught to hearing non-signers: parents, school teachers and interpreters, who have a key role in the struggle by Kosovar sign language users to gain equal human rights.

One of the ultimate aims of the community empowerment and language vitalization activities is to develop Deaf education so that KosSL will be used as the language of instruction in the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities. Article 24 on education in the Convention states that appropriate measures shall be taken for 'Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community' and 'Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development'. Furthermore, 'In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language [...]'

Language users realize that a process containing several stages is necessary in order to achieve equal opportunities. Therefore the process needs to start with language documentation and research:

The reason for sign language research is that without it and a dictionary we could not advocate recognition of the language. We would not have any tools to use in this lobbying process. That is why we are so eager to get the dictionary ready, then we will use it as a tool when we lobby the government. It will also enhance the credibility of the dictionary when we have the logo of the government on the publication, meaning that they stand behind it as well. Sign language research needs to be continued in the future, for the language to be studied **in depth. Deaf people's signing is not simple, but** sign language is a rich language, comparable to spoken

language. They are both equal means of thinking and communication.

- Enver Kurtalani (Deaf KAD project administrator) -

Hearing people have a lot of information about spoken languages, which have been investigated intensely for a long time [...]. Our research in sign language gives the language respect in the eyes of hearing people as well.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

If there was no research, how could we know anything about our sign language? But we do have research, based on data collection through interviews and then group discussions – so we have a lot of documented data. That is important for the recognition of the language. I think research is a precondition for the legal recognition of the language.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Sign language has to be legally recognized, that is why the dictionary is important. If we do not have legal rights then we do not have social services, and so on. This would mean that we Deaf people will be marginalized. That is why SLW is so significant; for us not to lag behind but to catch up with hearing people. We used to have a low status – now it is improving and the dictionary work plays an important role.

- Faton Parduži (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

Sign language documentation and description is at the centre of successful language vitalization activities in a sign language community. The Kosovar project clearly demonstrates that this is a process where the different steps needed cannot be disregarded – but at the same time it is necessary to follow



different approaches simultaneously, since language is pervasive in all areas of the life of a sign language user: due to the low education level among sign language users, organizational capacity building and management training are essential so that the language users can lead the project in the first place. The main activities of the project or the organization involve sharing information and raising the awareness of both language users of the community and the hearing majority. In order for language users to be able to advocate the recognition of their language and their (linguistic) human rights, they need sign language interpreters for communication with local and national government representatives. Interpreters are crucial also for sign language users to have access to public services. The interpreters can be efficiently trained only when there is enough detailed knowledge of the structure of the sign language in question. Language documentation and description activities are necessary to provide this linguistic information. Language research is also the self-evident precondition for developing teaching materials for the education sector – both for teacher training and for basic education.

By simultaneously addressing a number of priority areas which all aim at language vitalization, it is possible to strengthen the capacities of the community on a broad front. Figure 1 presents a schematic structure where sign language

documentation and description is the basis for other language vitalization actions and development areas of training and work.

A parallel to this multi-area approach is found in Kealey & Protheroe's (1995: 82) discussion of the principal factors explaining the success or failure of North-South collaborations in relation to local capacity-building:

**...the aims of technical assistance should be shifted** from counterpart training in more or less isolated projects to a long-term, broad-based cycle of organizational learning or capacity building, in which institutional weaknesses are identified throughout an organization and several priority areas upgraded simultaneously. It would be a long-term attack across a broad front, not an attack on an isolated spot in the hope that results would spill over to the rest of the organization.

The Kosovar approach is easily applicable to other sign language communities. The elements needed are similar – sign language documentation and description, organizational capacity building, awareness raising, advocacy work, interpreter training, developing Deaf education, and so on. Depending on the most urgent needs of the community, the situation and the historical background of the country, the priorities and the order of the activities implemented can, however, be different.

Further to this, Batibo (2009) considers documentation as a central strategy in the empowerment and language revitalization process of minority languages in Africa. Language documentation and description is seen as a strategy for

promoting the status of threatened minority languages in Africa, for expanding their domains of use, and for developing positive attitudes towards the languages among their speakers. In his community-based documentation approach, Batibo emphasizes that the aim of language documentation should not be motivated solely by theoretical academic needs. The focus needs to be put on seeing the collected data as a resource for preparing material that can be used in the language community and country in question.

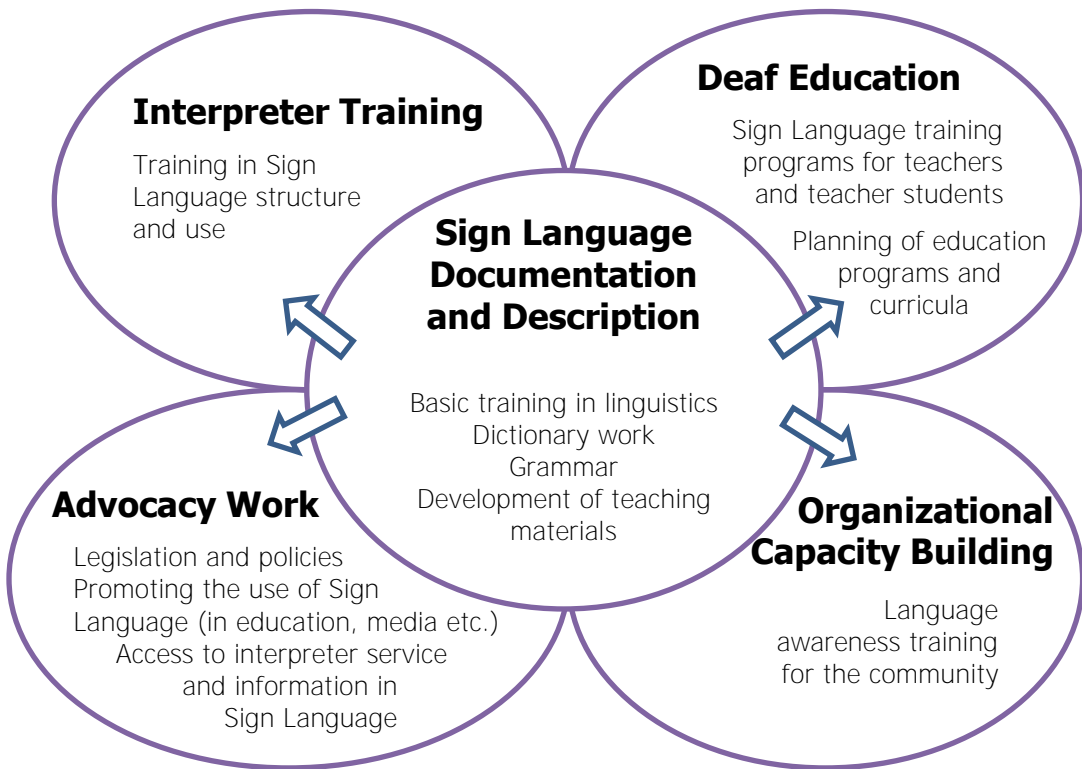


Figure 1. Sign language documentation and description as the basis for language vitalization actions.

## **5.5 Methods used in Sign Language Work on a daily basis**

When asked about the success of SLW, the research assistants Nebih and Drita regarded the most significant achievements as: the involvement of the community, linguistic lobbying work, the Prizren sign language training, and obtaining a gender balance.

Drita starts by saying:

The successes of SLW of KAD are: First, we were able to give language training to teachers in the Prizren school. Secondly, co-operation with the ministries at the government [...]. Thirdly, the forthcoming DVD and booklet dictionary publication.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

To which Nebih immediately adds:

Yes, these three, and then we had success in filming Deaf people in the provinces, three persons in each club. We succeeded in getting a gender balance and people of different ages as well. And then we succeeded in not leaving any club out of the representatives in the sign language working group, and also tried to have both genders represented in the group.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

What these answers reflect, in addition to successful activities, is a sense of democratic and all-inclusive working methods. Using and teaching participatory methods was one of the overt aims of the project. For the community to gain ownership in the

project from the very beginning of the SLW, regional Deaf clubs were asked to take part in the decision of who should be video-interviewed. The clubs were given a set of criteria: the persons to be filmed should have native-like signing skills, and there should be a fair gender balance and age distribution. These criteria had two equally important purposes: firstly, to get linguistically representative and unbiased language data, and secondly to establish democratic and respectful methods of working together. This kind of democratic decision-making would be very different from what used to be the praxis in the hearing-run Deaf organizations.

The importance of the involvement of the community was realized through work on the publication *Broshura e Gjuhës së Shenjave*, which led to conflicts in the community, as mentioned above:

I remember the first book [*Broshura e Gjuhës së Shenjave*] – the signs in it were not familiar to me, they seemed foreign. I think they were copied from other sign languages, since they were not Kosovar. It was such a mess. I want to have a publication that reflects my language – original KosSL.

- Liridon Gashi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

Through this publication, other lessons were learned too, relating to the format of a dictionary for sign language, and the methods for choosing which signs to include:

And another reason was that the book was printed and there was no video or DVD accompanying the book. It is so much better to get the signing from live material. Compared to that, a book is not that good and much more difficult. You get to see signed sentences through a live material that you cannot get through a book.

- Ramadan Gashi (Deaf KAD liason officer) -

The work I was involved in for the *Broshura e Gjuhës së Shenjave* was totally different from the SLW that we are conducting now. Because before we did not have any training [...], we started with a list of 400 words given to us, some of them we did not know, and we invented some of the signs – because we did not know how to do it properly. We did not do any research into how Deaf people were actually signing; our group just put signs together for the publication by ourselves.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

In her discussion of the flaws of using prefabricated wordlists, Mosel (2004: 44) points out the negative psychological aspect of the translation method expressed in the last quotation, above. The native speaker is put in an awkward situation when asked to translate words that s/he does not know. Even though direct elicitation through word lists are often used in studies of the lexicon, there are several problems involved in the use of prefabricated wordlists. Mithun (2001: 37–38) discusses the limitations of this kind of collection of vocabularies. She finds that data collected through wordlists tend to be dominated by nouns, and are focused on concrete objects and those concepts that have counterparts in the language of the wordlist. Verbs

are rarer, as are more abstract concepts and culture-specific words that the linguist is not aware of, and therefore does not know how to ask for. That nouns are favoured is seen by Mithun as particularly unfortunate for languages where verb constructions are a dominant form of expression. Also Grimes (2002: 71) advises field workers to ignore wordlists in another language, and to observe what the language users actually say, i.e. getting **one's** lexical data from texts and discourses.

Within SLW we were aware of the problems related to the use of wordlists in connection with sign languages, and therefore we avoided using wordlists written in another language. The research assistants excerpted signs directly from the videotaped interviews, and made semantic divisions for the signs in the dictionary (family, food and drink, clothing, the home, and so on). Additional elicitation was undertaken in the working group through the use of visual pictures and free discussions. One important reason for the avoidance of wordlists was that lists do not allow one to pay attention to lexical variation. The use of a prefabricated written list easily makes one believe that there is a one-to-one relationship between words and signs and their meaning in the two different languages. Moreover, the use of a word list written in another language distorts the understanding of which language is the focus of attention in the first place. For people who have never had a lesson in their mother tongue at school, and never

thought of their sign language as a language with a grammar of its own, it is not easy to distinguish between natural sign language and signing that is influenced by a spoken language. The situation becomes even more complicated and paradoxical once the spoken language in question is the language that is used for reading and writing – since the first language lacks a written form.

In the SLW we deliberately kept spoken languages out of the discussion until as late a stage as possible. This meant that all of the stages (from data collection through video interviews, and excerpting signs from the video data, to the analysis of citation forms and filming of entry signs and example sentences) were done without the involvement of hearing people (with myself as the only exception).<sup>16</sup> Bilingual hearing people were not be involved until the phase where Albanian and Serbian equivalents for the signs, and translations of the signed sentences into written language, were needed. The fact that the dictionary work was made primarily by Deaf sign language users themselves was also naturally empowering for the language community.

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<sup>16</sup> I gave training in all stages of the project but I was not present during the collection of data, since my presence would most probably have influenced the sign language that was recorded. My restricted skills in the spoken languages of Kosovo positively contributed to the exclusion of spoken language interference in those phases of work that I was involved in.



The teaching of other people was used as a method to reinforce learning. With the support of advisors, Nebih and Drita were responsible for planning, arranging and conducting SLW group meetings. They also gave some hands-on training to the group members on topics that they had recently learned themselves, such as working methods, team work, note-taking, the use of technical equipment, and the basic sign structure of KosSL. Nebih explains:

We had been working for a while with Drita and then the working group was established. We had therefore more experience of the work, and presented it to the group – but I got the feeling that they did not really respect the work that we were doing or the training. The work progressed and we documented and depicted new signs and signing variation. Then it changed and now I think that they have more respect for our work.  
- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

To which Drita adds:

Yes, and in the group we also discussed things and had an idea that we will teach the group members how to implement our work in practice. They got to excerpt signs from the video interviews themselves, then they were practicing how to videotape, draw and depict the signs and prepare the sign files. It was only after this that they realized what our work was really about. Before, when they were presented with ready-made sign cards prepared by us, they did not realize the amount of work that was involved, and could not understand why our work was proceeding so slowly. It was only when they came to practice documenting and depicting

signs at the office for three days that they realized what the SLW is all about.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Training is at the very core of the participatory approach for building local capacities and strengthening local ownership. A sufficient amount of time needs to be reserved for the learning process. As Schneider & Libercier (1995: 14) emphasize, 'participation is an individual and collective learning process, and the experiences that it provides must be gained individually, again and again'.

The research assistants noticeably received self-confidence from their teaching experiences. They also took part in teaching interpreter students. Prior to the project, it was not at all self-evident that the native signers themselves had a mandate to claim how to sign KosSL. As the SLW and the training progressed, the role of linguistic expertise was shifted from the interpreters, who were not even all native in KosSL, to the SLW team. The language research gave the Deaf research assistants more confidence when approached with language questions, for example by interpreter students:

Before the training I thought that sign language can be used [...] as the interpreters say. Through the interpreter training, with training about deafness and with the training on sign language, a lot of things have changed.

- Rukije Gashi (hearing KAD advocacy officer) -

SLW also gives you credibility when you teach, since what you say is based on research. If you, for instance, teach interpreters and they ask you for a sign and you do not know it, it does not give a very professional impression.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

The KAD benefitted hugely from the newly acquired skills of Nebih and Drita. They gained a professional role as experts on their own first language. These skills were needed, for example in order to assess sign language interpreter students. A method for assessing sign language production, comprehension, and communicative skills was developed. One of the biggest impacts on the students was when they were able to watch the video-filmed assessments themselves:

This was the first time that we ever did this kind of assessment. Some of the interpreters thought about their own skills that 'yes, I do know sign language 100%' but when they saw themselves on video they were very grateful to us for our comments. I hope this assessment will support them to develop their signing.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

For the interpreters it is so different when you think of yourself signing and you in your own opinion sign well. Then you see yourself on the TV screen and it looks so different from what you imagined.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Also the SLW group members appreciated the work and training provided by Nebih and Drita:

They [Nebih and Drita] work well. I am a member of the Board and I have seen them giving reports of their work at the Board meetings. And to us in the working group, they explain new linguistic information in a very clear way using examples so that we group members understand it. Their behaviour is really professional.

- Elma Hasani (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

The two [Nebih and Drita] do not make decisions by themselves but have discussion with us in the group. We then all decide together. The decisions have been about different things concerning the book and the DVD. They show real respect for the group and we all share the responsibility of making decisions.

- Liridon Gashi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

The relationship between the outsider linguists (Florjan Rojba and myself) and the local sign language users was characterized by mutual learning. The local language users struggled with new linguistic concepts and working methods, whereas I had my hands full with learning the language and acquainting myself with the Kosovar Deaf culture and Balkan mainstream cultural habits. Our relationship was characterized by mutual trust:

I think that they [the two advisors] were well prepared, and had been in Kosovo prior to the SLW to acquaint themselves with the culture and the sign language. They adapted to the Kosovar way – and took a very neutral role. [...] I remember it was easy to communicate with them.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

The work started – it was easy to understand the communication in KosSL. We had the two foreign advisors involved. They signed differently from us here in Kosovo, but we had good communication with them. It was a good combination with two Kosovars [research assistants] and two outside advisors.

- Faton Parduzi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

We had two foreign advisors who gave us training. We also taught them things and it was real interaction. The work made progress and things were very clear to me.

- Liridon Gashi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

Since we advisors were in Kosovo only two to three weeks at a time, Nebih and Drita had to do most of the work by themselves. The presence of the advisors for short periods of time turned out to be a successful solution both for efficient learning and for the use of time. Clearly, one benefit of the advisors travelling back and forth was that the Deaf research assistants and the community could function independently, which helped us to avoid outside dominance:

If I compare this to my experience of how little I learned during all my years in school, I have learned so much more about how to work from these two SLW advisors [...]. The advisors were not present with us all the time, they stayed for about one month or a few weeks. They gave intensive training and guided us on how to get started with our work. Then they left and we continued the work by ourselves. If there were any problems that we could not solve by ourselves, we put

them aside and during the next visit of the advisors we confronted them with our problems and together found a solution. So along the way we got a solution to each problem that arose from our work, and we could see our work develop.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

If we had had an advisor by our side all the time, we would just have gotten used to having someone solving all our problems all the time. But in our case we really had to manage by ourselves – it was much better. The advisor is present for a few weeks or a month, and then leaves us with clear working tasks to implement. Real learning takes place when you have to do it all by yourself. And if we had problems, we just discussed them with the advisor the next time he/she was present. I do not think we would have learned this as well if we had had an advisor present all the time. We would just have been nodding our heads and saying 'yes, yes'. I think this interval teaching was so much better.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Many factors contributed to the successful learning results of the research assistants Nebih and Drita. Yet, one of the most crucial factors was their openness and willingness to learn. James and Garrett (1991: 19–20) call this quality '**learning readiness**' and suggest that 'it is commonsensical to suppose that people will learn something most eagerly when they experience a need for that particular piece of knowledge or skill'. In the Kosovar case this learning was tightly tied to learning about language. James and Garrett (1991: 20) continue: 'The ability to spot mismatch between present and

target skill is probably enhanced by being able to talk about that mismatch. That is why it is likely that the development of a user-friendly metalanguage – that is, a language for talking about language – is a necessary condition for improvement<sup>4</sup>.

As we have seen, the methods used in SLW were heavily based on active participation and training. However, the training sessions were not conducted through theoretical lessons but were merely hands-on sessions and learning-by-doing. The research assistants and the working group members were given the main responsibility for the progress of the work. The approach turned out to give positive results – especially when there were no advisors present, and the work was conducted independently. That the training really paid off can also be seen in the next section. One of the outcomes of the approach was the sign language training sessions given to the hearing teachers at the *Nëna Terezë* deaf school in Prizren.

## **5.6 Successful sign language training for the hearing teachers at the *Nëna Terezë* deaf school in Prizren**

One kind of SLW activity implemented in 2008 consisted of 15 pilot sessions (four hours per session) of sign language training delivered to teachers and educators at the *Nëna Terezë* Deaf school in Prizren. This training was implemented by KAD and partly funded by FSDEK II, a Finnish governmental project

supporting the development of the education sector in Kosovo. Nebih and Drita, who had received brief but intensive training on language teaching, worked as language instructors during the training sessions, together with volunteers from the SLW group. Group members took it in turns as language models for the practical exercises during the sessions. There was also a sign language interpreter present during all sessions. The following quotes reflect some of the experiences and insights gained during the training sessions:

In the SLW group we were discussing taking part as volunteers in the Prizren training. [...] We made a schedule for different people to participate on different occasions. We practiced at the office beforehand, before we visited the school – it was very nice to be at the school. The signing skills of the teachers are very varied. [...] I find the sign language training extremely important from the perspective of Deaf children.

- Faton Parduzi (Deaf member of the sign language working group) -

I was familiar with all the teachers in the Prizren school, since I attended the school myself. I finished school, started working at the KAD, and now returned to the school to teach sign language. We prepared the training programme together with Karin, the advisor. This course was just very basic. Together with the teachers we went through signs they already knew and then also taught signs that were new to them [...]. Some of the teachers from before thought that sign language is a poor language, but they did not realize that this was partly due to their limited knowledge of the language. We Deaf people have fluent sign language; the teachers realized this during the training.



Now, afterwards, the teachers are asking us when we could come and continue the training. We just have to hope we might return there some day, depending on the project. I am really surprised that they are actually expecting us back!

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

It was perhaps inevitable that some clashes would take place between the native Deaf instructors and the hearing teachers during the training sessions:

We were preparing the training and Drita and I were filming ourselves in short stories on the topic of **'family'**. We were then watching the signed video material in class together with the teachers. I was signing on the video, and some of the teachers said **'You, Nebih, you sign wrong!'**. **It was about the sign order MY UNCLE DAUGHTER**, which in Albanian is **'daughter of my uncle'**. **The teachers** thought that the sign order should be the same as the Albanian word order. I got a little bit upset **since I felt they didn't respect me**, so I stood up and explained: **'You remember when you were my teachers and taught me according to the Albanian word order? This was one of the reasons why I did not understand what you taught'**. **The teachers then wondered why. 'I could not understand when you signed in the word order of the Albanian language. If the education had had a bilingual approach, with fluent signing, I would have understood you!'**

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

It was during the same discussion about the sign order. I then explained: take another language, like English, as a comparison, all languages in the world have different word orders. It was only after this that they understood that Albanian and KosSL have different word and sign orders. It is the grammatical rules of the

language that determines the word order – and sign language has a different grammar.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

However, there is a strong belief among the native language users in the possibility for change also within education.

Ramadan tells about his experience:

In the beginning [...] in FSDEK training, it was difficult **with the teachers' attitude** towards the training. Their behaviour towards us was not respectful, and they tried to hide behind their professional role and were not open to the training. I observed that the first five times were difficult, but after that their attitudes changed. The teachers started to get interested in the training and in learning. They wanted the training to continue. There were clearly two groups of teachers; the older ones, who were more reluctant to learn, and the younger teachers, who had a much more open attitude.

- Ramadan Gashi (Deaf KAD liason officer) -

To which Enver adds:

That **[Ramadan's comment]** is an important observation. We have to accept that you are not able to change the attitude of the older generation of teachers. They are stuck in their way of thinking, dating back to Communist times. The younger generation of teachers want to learn; they study more and more and they proceed in their careers through university studies. They are sensitive to new information and learn fast. The change will come only after this new group steps into the picture.

- Enver Kurtalani (Deaf KAD project administrator) -

The responses from the teachers show that the pilot training was, at least for some of them, a positive experience:

I have worked for 36 years at the school, and this was the first sign language training I have ever received. It was a positive experience. [...] 80% of the teachers in this school do not know sign language. They should use the interpreters more. But maybe some of them think that they know enough, and maybe they think that they do not need an interpreter.

- Hearing teacher at Nëna Terezë school in Prizren -

It was interesting to follow our ex-students – Nebih, Faton, and the others – during the training sessions. They seemed so serious and interested in what they were doing. Their behaviour was very different from how they behaved when they were students in our school. Now they were our teachers, we felt that they had learned something from us – they were good teachers.

- Hearing teacher at Nëna Terezë school in Prizren -

According to Hinton (2001a: 14, 2001b: 349) training native speakers to teach their language is an element in an increasing number of revitalization programs for endangered languages. This might be as part of a process of encouraging speakers to use their language, but as Hinton points out, the native speaker is the one who actually has information about the language and therefore ought to be part of any teaching situation. The human resources for this process is a challenge, since the majority of the endangered languages are not taught at universities, and native speakers of an endangered language

are unlikely to have training in language teaching. Hinton also remarks that, on the other hand, the professionals in language teaching might have never realized the difference between teaching a world language as compared with teaching a language that has no writing system or literature, and only a few native language users.

**Hinton's (2001b: 350)** apt description of prevailing methods – sink-or-swim and learning by experience – for the training of the teacher's aide (i.e. the native speaker present in the class) is in accordance with experiences from the Kosovar pilot training. The limited time and financial resources restricted the training that was given to Nebih and Drita and the SLW group volunteers prior to the Prizren sessions. However, many of them clearly had the potential to become good teachers, and I observed a rise in self-confidence and improved teaching skills as the training proceeded. For many of the sign language users involved, merely standing in front of, and instructing their former teachers – who represented a non-sign-language teaching approach – was an enormous challenge.

This pilot sign language training was one of the first steps in the transition to bilingual Deaf education. Improving and developing Deaf education is one of the primary long-term goals of the development co-operation project and of the advocacy work of the KAD. The high level of illiteracy reported in the *Report of the status of Deaf people in the Republic of*

*Kosovo* (2010) is striking. Although 73% of Deaf respondents finished primary school and 63% graduated from high school, a large majority, 66%, are illiterate. In addition to this, the report reveals that 89% of respondents felt that their **teachers' signing** ability was poor (given the options excellent/average/poor). Education should provide access to society on equal basis with hearing people, but in the present case, it seems that this education is counterproductive, and is actually disempowering the sign language community.

The needs analysis of the protection and promotion of sign languages and the rights of their users in member states of the Council of Europe, made by Krausneker (2008: 32–33), recommends bilingual education for sign language users: 'Recommendation 10: *Make bilingualism the goal*. Bilingual language competence should be the goal of compulsory schooling for sign language users. Both the national sign language and the national spoken language (reading and writing) need to be taught. [...] Recommendation 14: *Sign language as a language of education*. Any school for the Deaf should offer a bilingual programme. The national sign language should be used as the means of instruction for all subjects and should be taught as a language in a subject allocated just to it'.

As part of the FSDEK II activities, Professor Kristina Svartholm from Sweden was invited to Kosovo to give a basic introduction in bilingual Deaf education to the teachers and

educators at the Prizren school. Svartholm, who holds the **unique position of 'Professor (Chair) of Swedish as a second language for the deaf'** at Stockholm University, conducted training on two occasions, in April and May 2008. Based on his own experiences, Nebih sums up the reasons why the teachers are in urgent need of sign language training:

Hearing friends of the Deaf have learned to communicate through gesturing – also in the families. And then we have the teachers at the school. Whenever there was a new teacher employed, they started without any signing skills. In order to be able to teach in the school, the teachers started to learn to sign by communicating with the pupils. This was a slow process and a real waste of time. Everything should be done prior to starting work in the school, teachers should be given training in sign language. This would guarantee that everything runs smoother and faster.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

As a result of the information and training given by Svartholm, Nebih is able to justify the benefits of bilingual education. He sees the bilingual approach in the future school for the Deaf as enabling the students to become equal in the society:

Then you are able to be in contact and communicate with the university or other instances by yourself by writing emails. You will be able to write your tests and exams by yourself when you have good writing skills. That is why the bilingual approach is crucial. [...] Without bilingual education your limited knowledge of the words in the written language makes you inferior in relation to hearing people. But with a bilingual education you have skills in the written language, you

will have cultural knowledge, confidence and good sign language skills. This results in a high self-confidence and an open attitude – you realize that you are equal with, and in the same situation as, hearing people.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Also some of the teachers were aware of their limited language skills and expressed their support of sign language classes as **part of the teachers' training at the university:**

If two or three students sign among themselves, I cannot understand. I understand only when they sign to me individually, since they change their signing when they are signing to us teachers. [...] It is easier to communicate with a child with a Deaf family background. They can be flexible and change their signing.

- Hearing teacher at Nëna Terezë school in Prizren -

Yes, there should be [sign language classes as part of university training]. When we studied, the oral method was prevailing and sign language was not supposed to be used.

- Hearing teacher at Nëna Terezë school in Prizren -

Even though the pilot sessions in sign language were very restricted in scope, they clearly show the potential of sign language users in teaching their own language, and as experts on the basis of their own experiences of oral education. Deaf sign language users need to be involved in all phases of

developing education in Kosovo – in the planning, training and implementation of education in the classrooms.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In order to deliver bilingual education, plans are currently being made to launch a class assistant and sign language instructor programme for Deaf sign language users. The curriculum is being developed in co-operation with the KAD, the FAD and the Kosovar government.



## **6. Sign language vitalization**

### **6.1 Vitalizing a sign language**

The activities and outcomes of the vitalization processes discussed above, which aim to strengthen the status of KosSL and promote its use in new domains such as research and education, cover most of the areas that UNESCO (2003: 2) regards as fundamental when enhancing the vitality of an endangered language. These areas are 'language documentation; pedagogic materials; the training of local linguists; the training of language teachers; new policy initiatives; public awareness-raising; technical, logistical and financial support (from, for example, individual language specialists, NGOs, local governments and international institutions)'.<sup>1</sup>

The actions taken in order to strengthen the use of KosSL are, however, better covered by **Helander's term** *vitalization*; the use of the term *revitalization* in relation to the Kosovar situation is problematic for a number of reasons. It is in fact not the language itself that has first priority within the Kosovar project – instead, the language is the means to reach a certain goal. Thus, the project does not have a linguistic motivation but is driven by a human rights approach, with the goal of promoting the rights of Deaf people. This is in accordance with

the themes supported by Finnish development policy and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland: to promote equal opportunities for participation and to promote 'the rights of groups that are easily excluded and discriminated, particularly children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities' (*Cross cutting themes of Finnish development policy*, 2010). For Deaf people, equal opportunities and participation in society are tied tightly to linguistic rights – i.e. the promotion of sign language use. This means that the focus of the project is the language **users'** status, which is promoted by activities that support the use of sign language. In this way, language vitalization actions lead to the empowerment of the users.

The main reason why the established term *revitalization* is not suitable in relation to the Kosovar situation is that the prototypical use of the term is closely related to activities preventing language endangerment, and if used would therefore suggest that KosSL is to be defined as an endangered language. A discussion of this kind never surfaced within the project among sign language users. The topic simply seems not to be of any major concern within the community; rather, the language **users'** priority is to shift their marginalized position and gain access to society on equal terms with other Kosovar citizens, i.e. to have their human rights fulfilled. Even though it is unlikely that anybody would suggest KosSL as an example of

a vital language, used in all domains of the Kosovar society, the language is not considered endangered. New generations of Deaf children continue to learn KosSL at the latest when they start to socialize with other Deaf children at school. No foreign sign language threatens the use of KosSL, and until now cochlear implants for Deaf children in Kosovo have been rare. One challenge in evaluating the development of the vitality of KosSL is that there has been no research on the historical development of the language and its use, and there are no official statistics on the demographics concerning the Deaf population. In addition to these facts, as an outside linguist I do not consider myself to have a mandate to define the vitality of **anybody's language without** being more extensively involved, and having access to the opinions of language users themselves.

There is no doubt that forceful linguistic assimilation leads to language endangerment, and that the interrupted transmission of language from one generation to the next weakens the status of a signed language (cf. Schembri 2010). But I feel it is too radical to declare that a language is endangered only because it is a signed language. I say this while fully aware **that the majority of the world's sign languages** have several features in common with many endangered spoken languages: they are usually unstudied, or understudied; they are not taught at universities; they are not used in the

education system; they lack a written form; and they are used by marginalized or low-power language groups, and so on. However, the combination of language endangerment and sign languages is a relatively recent topic of discussion. The Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) within the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at SOAS, in London, has funded over 150 teams to document endangered languages all over the world. Only six sign language research projects have been included so far (*Endangered Languages Project*, 2010). Discussions among linguists on the risk of sign language endangerment will hopefully increase in the future.

Signed languages are also not considered in the UNESCO document on language vitality and endangerment.<sup>18</sup> Although the UNESCO document (2003: 22, footnote) states that **'throughout this document, the term 'language' includes sign languages, and 'speech' or 'endangered language communities' also refer to sign language communities'**, some fundamental differences between signed and spoken languages are ignored. When reviewing the **document's** nine major evaluative factors on language vitality and state of endangerment in light of the Kosovar situation, it becomes clear that the most commonly-

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<sup>18</sup> A specific questionnaire for data collection on endangered sign languages has been developed by the International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies at the University of Central Lancashire in cooperation with UNESCO.

used factor, intergenerational language transmission, is not central for the majority of sign language users. As stated earlier, the discontinuous nature of the transmission of sign languages is usually more the rule than the exception, and if the parents choose to use a signed language for communicating with their Deaf child, they first have to learn it themselves. This means that language transmission between the parents and the child differs from what is usually the situation for spoken languages, since the sign language in question is not the mother tongue of the parents.

According to the UNESCO document, intergenerational language transmission is the most pervasive factor influencing the need for revitalization actions for spoken languages. Also **Helander's (2008, 2009) distinction between the terms** revitalization and vitalization is explicitly based on this criterion – revitalization is used in situations where the language is no longer naturally transmitted to the next generation. Within the domain of vitalization actions for a sign language (and surely also for revitalization actions) the main focus is therefore not within the home. Even if the long-term goal is to promote the linguistic conditions for Deaf children – both within their families and in Deaf education – other steps need to be taken first. As seen in the Kosovar case, raising awareness within the community, research on the language, the development of teaching materials, and interpreter training are all needed first,

in order to be able to bring about changes in the Deaf educational approach and in order to influence the communicational choices of the hearing parents of Deaf children.

Additionally, one of the evaluative factors in the UNESCO document is concerned with shifts in domains of language use. The degree of vitality is evaluated on a scale from 5 (the language is in use in all domains) to 1 (the language is not in use in any domain), and it is the dominant language of the surrounding community that is taking over more and more domains. The document does not take sign language users into consideration in its discussion of the risk for language shift: for sign language users, the risk for language shift into the spoken language of the surrounding community is simply not relevant because of physiological limits. It is not physically possible for a Deaf person to abandon a sign language in favour of a spoken language, even though one could debate whether oralistic ideologies, negative attitudes towards signed languages, and cochlear implants for pre-lingually deaf children can be seen as an expression of a *desire* from outside towards such a language shift.

Finally, a sign language may never have been vital or might never have had a high status in the society, and hence it seems inappropriate to speak about its re-vitalization. Obviously, this does not hold for all signed languages; for example, in Finland,

sign language was used in Deaf education in the mid-1800s and sign language use was not considered stigmatized prior to the oralist phase. According to Salmi & Laakso (2005: 75–76), Deaf sign language users were actually the first underprivileged language and cultural minority in Finland to formally organize themselves. This took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The status of sign language then declined as the oralistic view on Deaf people grew stronger in the 1900s.

## **6.2 Sign language as a right and as a resource in the vitalization process**

In the quotes from Kosovar sign language users that are presented in Chapter 5, one can sense a feeling of pride and ownership in the project and the work done. Kealey & Protheroe (1995: 97–98) identify professional modesty, equal treatment, an atmosphere of trust, and mutual learning as elements needed for the local acquisition of skills and local ownership that encourages sustainability within development cooperation work after foreigners have left. Eyford & Eyford (1995: 24–25) take ownership to be one of the indicators of culturally appropriate development, in addition to factors such as participation, using local knowledge, integration into the social structure, appropriate considerations of gender issues, and culturally appropriate integration of new ideas. According

to them, ownership is crucial (Eyford & Eyford, 1995: 24): 'One sure sign that a project is culturally relevant is that people feel that it is theirs. This is related to ownership, empowerment, and the ability to sing the praises of the activity. If there is evident pride and satisfaction in what is being done, this intangible quality goes a long way to seeing the project over difficulties as it moves towards its larger objective'.

The involvement of outside advisors was necessary to initiate the Kosovar project and start the activities, to provide advice and guidance, and to encourage the community during its first steps towards success. But sustainable results are reached only when the community is taking the lead. The findings also support the efficiency of the main principle for development cooperation put forward by Vasko, Kjisik & Salo-Lee (1998: 142): 'culture should be made the first cross-cutting principle in the concept of sustainable development'.

That (Deaf sign) language users themselves define their priorities according to their own (cultural) values is inherent in two of the three language planning orientations suggested by Ruiz (1990: 16–17): *language-as-right* and *language-as-resource*. The third one, *language-as-problem*, is a point of view typically defined from outside the community, where local vernaculars and their communities are seen as social problems to be resolved. Ruiz characterizes language-as-right as a reaction to assimilating and oppressing policies and is often



**justified by the legal, moral and natural right to one's language** and local identity. According to Ruiz, language-as-resource is an orientation that has not received a lot of attention in actual language policy development. It recognizes language as a social resource, but emphasizes still that language is a human quality with its own special characteristics that should not be treated as an isolated artefact. In the following section I briefly address the issue of *sign language as a right* and *sign language as a resource* from the perspective of the Kosovo vitalization situation.

### **6.2.1 Sign language as a right**

The language vitalization process that started during the Kosovar project can be defined as an important step towards linguistic human rights and can be used as a tool for sign language users to liberate themselves from (linguistic) oppression, and for erasing the misconceptions associated with sign languages. As we have seen, a prerequisite for this is the active involvement and commitment of members representing the local sign language community at all stages of the project. By also involving international Deaf role models from abroad, and by utilizing participatory methods, heightened awareness about language and language use leads to the community taking ownership of the process.

The right to use and have access to a sign language is a topic that emerges indirectly from the interview and discussion data. The most extreme case, of not having access to a language, is sadly still very common in Kosovo: deaf children, before attending school, are raised in a hearing environment without access to a (signed) language, with all the cognitive, emotional and social consequences that this has for the individual. The poor education level for Kosovar Deaf children at the moment also creates an obstacle to gaining access to a second language (in written form), i.e. the spoken language of the majority (*Report of the status of Deaf people in the Republic of Kosovo*, 2010).

Without entering into the discussion on different definitions of individual versus collective language rights, linguistic rights or linguistic human rights, it can be stated that, despite all existing international conventions and treaties<sup>19</sup> there is still a lot of ignorance towards sign language users as a linguistic minority. In addition, there is always a gap between what is declared in the conventions and how they are implemented into practice. The most recent treaty dealing with the rights of sign language users is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where the rights of sign language users are spelled out explicitly in several articles, dealing with issues such as accessibility, access to information, and education. This

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<sup>19</sup> See Spolsky (2004) for an extensive overview of treaties recognizing linguistic minorities

treaty is exceptional because it is the first time that **'language'** is defined in a convention at this level, including both spoken and signed language in the definition **of 'language'** in article 2. There is a lot to be done concerning the linguistic human rights of sign language users in Kosovo, not to mention the rest of the world. No European national sign language has been recognized in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – even though many sign languages are well established and have a long history as minority languages.

Bradley (2002) notes that one of the most crucial factors in language maintenance is the attitudinal factor, and emphasizes the attitude of the community towards their own language. Both the attitudes of the sign language community and the attitudes of the surrounding society were prominent factors in the Kosovar case. A prerequisite for the implementation of linguistic rights for sign language users is the positive attitudes of the majority reflected in pro-active policies resulting in, for example, bilingual education programmes. UNESCO (2003) includes both **'governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies'** and **'community members' attitudes towards their own language'** as criteria for evaluating the vitality of a language.

It must be observed that the success of the work in Kosovo is in part directly due to the positive attitudes that have been displayed by the Kosovar government and society at large. The

Kosovar data reveal that meetings with the society of the majority (both on a governmental level and, for example, in the Prizren Deaf school) were fruitful. The Kosovar government has explicitly expressed its willingness to recognize KosSL and to improve Deaf education, in their desire to harmonize Kosovar legislation with EU standards. Liisa Kauppinen, President Emerita of the World Federation of the Deaf, experienced positive attitudes at the Kosovar Prime Minister's office and among governmental officials during her visits in Kosovo as an international expert on disability issues in 2009 and 2010. Kauppinen reported the atmosphere as being characterized by a natural equality between people, and felt that the hearing discussion partners were willing to listen to the opinions of the Deaf concerning, for example, inclusive education, when Deaf sign language users expressed a preference for centralized education in order to guarantee a signing environment with a large enough number of Deaf students. Kauppinen found the discussions on human rights issues with governmental officers to be trouble-free, and praised the officers for having acquainted themselves with relevant documents in advance, and for being well-prepared for the meetings. Their behaviour signalled an attitude of an exceptionally strong will for genuine co-operation (Liisa Kauppinen, 18 May 2010, personal communication). These positive attitudes are having a huge impact on both the success of the project and on further work,

and will contribute to the ongoing process of recognition of KosSL and to changes in the Kosovar legislation.

An essential aspect related to attitudes is access to relevant information. Decision-makers need accurate information about KosSL and their users in order to evaluate their situation. But **the language community's access to information is** perhaps even more important. Sign language users need information in order to become aware of their (linguistic) human rights. Sign language users in Kosovo have until now effectively been denied access to knowledge about what it means to have human rights, and to be an equal member in a democratic society. High rates of illiteracy and the non-existence of information in sign language has been devastating for gaining even basic insights about **one's rights. Information is also** needed concerning how the rights are implemented. But a legal recognition of the language by governmental authorities, and an acceptance of the language by the officials is not enough – financial resources need to be identified so that real change takes place.

The empowerment of a language community deals, in the literal sense of the word, with *power*. In Western societies, information and knowledge have traditionally been assets of the elite. Modern democracy, however, implies equal access for all. Access to information means access to power – power to change **one's** own situation. Due to the often poor educational

background of the sign language users, human resources development (such as training and information sharing) plays an important role in sign language vitalization and community empowerment.

Sign language users themselves also emphasized access to information as a key factor:

KAD has the staff and the board, and different working groups such as the youth group. In our activities it is important that we all have the same goals so that we know what we are heading towards and get everybody interested to be involved. That is why information sharing is the basis for everything. There might be club members that are not so sure about our aims, since they have not enough information.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

In their discussion on the imbalanced gender situation Nebih and Drita know that it is critical to obtain information and education:

Yes, women are discriminated against as compared to men. It is one of the goals – to get equality between the genders in different areas, like work and household.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Also hearing women are of lower status than men, they have lower education and training. By getting higher education, women can reach equality. Education is crucial – as it is for Deaf as well.

- Nebih Cakaj (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

Yes, the most crucial is education. Training and information – for getting better understanding.

- Drita Toprlak (Deaf KAD research assistant) -

### **6.2.2 Sign language as a resource**

The Kosovar sign language vitalization project is conducted through a human rights-based approach. In fact, the principle of maintenance and support of linguistic and cultural diversity worldwide is by itself justification enough for such vitalization activities. Signed languages illustrate one of the many alternative ways that there are for human beings to see and conceptualize the world. But what is most relevant concerning sign language community empowerment is the fact that the focus is more on the process than on the end result. Even though the vitalization activities might lead to parts of the language being documented and described, it is, in the long run, more valuable if this is conducted by the community members themselves. In this way, community members can break free from their acquired helplessness, due to the negative views that have labelled Deaf people, and which prevent community members from recognizing their capacities and their inner potential.

**Duranti's (1997, preface)** anthropologic view of language emphasizes language as a human and cultural resource: 'language is a powerful tool rather than a simple mirror of pre-

established social realities'. Duranti notes that, at the same time as being a historical product of social interaction, language is also the basis for any human experience – and speakers can be seen as social actors in possession of these linguistic resources. The Kosovar sign language community has an invaluable resource – their language, KosSL. The importance of this existing resource, and its inner strength and potential, need first and foremost to be made visible and explicit for the language users themselves. In fact, the vitalization and empowerment actions are really more about giving a gentle push in the right direction at the right time – the training and information given are minimal compared to the cumulative effect they have on attitudes. In an attitudinal climate where people are genuinely open to new information this will, at best, lead to language users acquiring pride in their language, and them taking control and responsibility to change their situation themselves. In this way, the preconditions for obtaining access to society are created. Language vitalization in a sign language community is therefore mostly concerned with raising awareness and shaping attitudes – about shedding light on the resources that the community members already possess: their language, their cultural heritage and their transnational identity.

By becoming aware of **one's resources and using them in** an empowering way, sign language users can in fact set an example for other minority and disability groups. This is a two-



way activity, since the prestige of the language will also increase when language users can be an example for others. Nexhat Shatri, Country Program Manager for Handicap International in Kosovo, and trainer in disability rights, has expertise in community planning and mainstreaming disability issues into local policies. According to Shatri, the lobbying and advocacy capacities of the KAD have strengthened during the past few years (Nexhat Shatri, 29 October 2010, personal correspondence). He has witnessed an increase in communication and co-operation between the KAD and other disability groups. He feels that the successful lobbying activities implemented by the KAD should be shared with other disability groups as good practice. According to him, all main organisations of people with disabilities in Kosovo, and also governmental departments, have acknowledged the lobbying work done by the KAD.

Habit Hajredini, Human Rights Coordinator in the Government of Republic of Kosovo, reports that the Kosovo Government has had good cooperation with KAD (Habit Hajredini, 8 November 2010, personal correspondence translated from Albanian to English by Selman Hoti). As the Director of the Office for Good Governance, Human Rights, Equal Opportunities and Gender Issues within the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Hajredini has witnessed the KAD having made important contributions to the development of a

national plan of action for people with disabilities in the Republic of Kosovo, and for the recognition of KosSL. According to Hajredini, the KAD is actively engaged in numerous lobbying activities for equal opportunities, and therefore a good example to be followed by other organisations. Hajredini also recognizes the impact of the lobbying work made by the KAD on an attitudinal level – in order for Deaf people to be recognized as a linguistic minority. Hajredini feels that the reason for the **success of the KAD's work lies** in the continuous commitment, institutional support in Kosovo and the support given by international partners.

Breivik (2005: 201) points out that, in comparison to other disability groups, the Deaf community has always been one of the first to organize themselves, and have had a high level of cultural awareness. Deaf people from different countries have been meeting each other on a regularly basis since the first international Congress of the Deaf in 1889. However, this might not be directly applicable to a non-Western Deaf communities – the knowledge that is gained from Western Deaf communities does not necessarily apply to non-Western communities.<sup>20</sup>

One important topic to bear in mind when it comes to language as resource of the community is the question about ownership of the language – what happens when the language

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<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer at Ishara Press who pointed out the differences between Western and non-Western Deaf communities concerning this issue.

moves out of the hands of the native users and into the hands of learners and non-signers? This can happen when the number of non-native signers increases, as a natural consequence as more language domains are conquered. This question about ownership of sign language has been raised in the language policy programmes for the sign languages of Finland (*Språkpolitiskt program för teckenspråken i Finland*, 2010: 7–8). Sign language users in Finland have strived over 100 years to strengthen the status of sign language by lobbying for society to assume its responsibilities. Today, several different institutions are involved – in sign language research and through implementing interpreter training programmes and Deaf education. This emphasizes the need for native language users to be involved in all phases of decision making, from planning to evaluation. The Kosovar sign language community needs to be aware that they, as native signers, are in control of maintaining and developing KosSL.

## **7. Conclusions**

This study on language vitalization and community empowerment in the Kosovar sign language community has focused on linguistic work taking place within the framework of a development co-operation project. The project was conducted as a joint project between two NGOs representing Deaf communities in the two countries: Kosovo and Finland. The long-term objectives of the project were to improve the status of KosSL and to guarantee the human (linguistic) rights of Deaf language users – for them to obtain access to society on an equal basis with other citizens. This was implemented through lobbying for legal recognition of KosSL and by advocacy work directed at governmental authorities with the aim of persuading them to assume responsibilities, for example in further developing the education system for deaf students. However, one of the central activities in the project, which was also needed for advocacy activities, was to conduct basic documentation and description of KosSL, and provide linguistic training for representatives of the sign language community.

Several fundamental questions emerged from the study. The results of the analysis have many implications for language vitalization and community empowerment work in sign language communities in the context of a developing country. I conclude by summarizing some of the lessons learned from the

work that are all directly applicable to similar work in other sign language communities, and need to receive close attention.

The partnership-enhancing methods that we chose had a significant influence on the success of the project, and gave community members a sense of ownership over their work. The methodological issues that emerged from the study dealt with a range of different topics, from the relationship between the language community and the outside advisor, to everyday working methods. Co-operation within Deaf sign language communities must be conducted with respect for the cultural realities of the community. The advisor's **awareness of her/his** position, ethical working practices, and attitudes are key issues to consider in order to develop a trustful working relationship. It is what happens in the very specific situations where individuals meet that determines the outcome of the work. Some of the most important preconditions for working successfully as partners are therefore good cross-cultural and communicative skills. In order to achieve transparent communication in the community, one of the first goals of the outside advisor should be to learn the local sign language. In more general terms, language choice is crucial, and concerns questions of metalanguage, which might also include a written language. Language choice is a powerful tool that can either foster open communication or exclude participants from taking part in interaction.

In order for linguistic work to be successful, it should be implemented by local native or near-native Deaf signers who have proven that they have the learning potential or skills needed. The recruitment of research staff for the work at hand is therefore central – the recruiting procedure should be conducted in accordance with transparent and democratic principles in order that those chosen may gain the trust of the community at large when the actual work starts. One way of building up a trustworthy relationship with the community is to create working groups with representatives from the community in connection with different project activities. The research staff who have been chosen can then reinforce the linguistic knowledge that they have acquired from the advisors by teaching the group as a whole what they have recently learned themselves. When people are required to teach, it is often an effective way for them to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The Kosovar research staff managed to create a respectful relationship with members of the working group partly because they openly shared their recently-acquired linguistic skills with the group during training sessions.

Teaching **one's** own language is not only useful as a means of reinforcing and supporting **one's** own learning. In the Kosovar project, the pilot sessions of sign language training given to teachers and educators at the *Nëna Terezë* deaf school

were successful in many respects: the school teachers and educators developed their skills in KosSL, the Deaf people involved improved their pedagogic skills, and the training was also an opportunity for the two groups – the school staff and representatives from the sign language community – to meet for relatively neutral discussions of a linguistic nature. It was an empowering experience for the Deaf people to be directly involved in developing deaf education and to stand in front of their former teachers in a new role, sharing the important linguistic information with them that they so urgently need in order to teach their own Deaf pupils effectively.

As far as the everyday working methods in the project are concerned, the advisors were only present in Kosovo for a couple of weeks at a time, which forced the local research staff to take responsibility as work progressed. It was an effective way to avoid the staff becoming too dependent upon the advisors. It is, however, important that the project supplies the local staff with enough face-to-face support from advisors, especially in the early stages of the work. The experience from the Kosovar project shows that the hands-on teaching method was effective. Research staff acquired most of the new information through learning by doing themselves. In addition, discussion of the methodology reveals that *learning* turned out to be the key concept in the co-operation. Capacity building is central when aiming for sustainable results, so that the local

sign language community obtains the tools – such as increased linguistic knowledge and skills, and the first part of a dictionary – that will make them able to continue with the work after the project funding ends. One of the challenges with project work in relation to capacity building is to satisfy the evaluation requirements of the donor. It is harder to assess progress in learning than it is to report on the number of documented signs in the language. At the beginning of a project, it is good to keep in mind the need for indicators that measure implicit and explicit increases in linguistic awareness.

Greater language awareness proved to be the foundation for all of the further skills development that the community needed to strive for further improvements by themselves. Language turned out to be so pervasive on all levels of work that it was almost too self-evident to be noticed. Different aspects of language were present – sign language is (1) the basis for a Deaf identity; (2) a means of communication; and (3) a fundamental human right for each Deaf individual. Language is (4) a hidden potential within the individuals; and (5) a very powerful resource once awoken and made overt. Language is (6) the tool by which to get access through communication to the inner resources of the individuals and to make use of it in linguistic advocacy work. Language is also the expected end result for both short term and long term goals – (7) in the form of a dictionary and other language teaching



resources, and (8) as the language of instruction in the future classroom of Deaf students in Kosovo.

Another lesson learned from the project was the importance of getting the whole language community involved. By having representatives from all Kosovar Deaf clubs present in the working group, except for the two Serbian clubs not attending any activities, we maximized the commitment of community members towards the work done. Interactive and all-inclusive working methods were also emphasized because of **the community's** prior negative experience of working with only a restricted group of language users. Naturally, there are other reasons why it is not advisable to work with isolated individuals in this kind of linguistic research: in order for your data to be reliable and to show actual variation in a language, broad representation of language users is needed – both as informants and for discussion of the findings.

The study highlighted two basic premises for this kind of language vitalization and community empowerment work: the need for Deaf advisors, and the importance of having a trained sign linguist involved. The most optimal case would of course be to recruit a Deaf sign linguist with cultural knowledge of the target country and with the necessary communicative and cross-cultural skills. The study also reveals the importance of having Deaf role models in the empowerment process. Topics such as Deaf culture, identity and Deafhood must be taught by

Deaf advisors. Through their contact with the local authorities, Deaf advisors can also function as examples of what Deaf people are able to achieve, and can make the point that Deaf people need to be included in planning activities, such as education, that concern them. The education experiences of individual Deaf sign language users are too valuable to be thrown away and not used in the process of developing education for Deaf people.

The need for linguistic expertise is evident since sign language documentation and description are integral to the vitalization and empowerment process. In order to improve education, train sign language interpreters, and produce materials for teaching sign language to family members, one needs to have access to documented data of how the language actually works. The Kosovar project shows that this is a process that cannot disregard the different steps involved, but at the same time the need for multiple approaches is clear. In Kosovo, the project started with a focus on organizational capacity building and management training, which was a precondition for the organization to be able to run other kinds of project activities. When the linguistic work finally started, we chose to have many programs and activities running simultaneously. Language is pervasive in all areas of the life of a sign language user, and by addressing many areas simultaneously we were

able to strengthen the capacities of the community on a broad front.

It will be very important to conduct a follow-up study in Kosovo after a few years, to assess the long-term effects of the work done. However, I hope that the present study will contribute to the field by raising methodological topics that are crucial for work in a sign language community in the context of a developing country. Some of the topics discussed are prerequisites for the vitalization and empowerment process while others can be seen as indicators of successful activities. The contribution of the linguist to the kind of humanistically oriented language research and activism presented in this study – with the focus not explicitly on language research *per se* but on enhancing the human rights of the language users through the research – differs from conventional academic research. Working within a sign language community has similar characteristics to work on endangered languages. Bradley & Bradley (2002: xx) show that the output of what the linguist produces in an endangered language context is less ‘theoretical’ and takes longer to show up concretely due to the need for processes that involve the input of the community in question. Duranti’s (1997: 334) words are a good reminder of the importance of this kind of language research: ‘Unfortunately, however, grammarians too often forget to remind themselves and others of the reasons for the study of language. The rules

of language as a game of chess too often overshadow the rules of language as a game of **life'**. Sign language vitalization activities and research can make a difference and have a tremendous impact on the future prospects of the lives of sign language users and their language communities. In response to a question about where he and his community will be in 20 years' **time**, Liridon Gashi, a Deaf member of the sign language working group, made the following reflection:

We will then have access to interpreters when we visit the doctor. Deaf education will be well developed and the Deaf will have access to higher education at the university. Deaf people will have work opportunities equal to those of hearing people and get good professions, for example within the computer business. The progress will take place slowly step by step. After 20 years I hope things have improved and we will have a good life!

## **Post Scriptum**

After conducting this study, successful linguistic advocacy work in Kosovo has continued. There has been progress with respect to two of the most essential long-term development objectives of the project: the recognition of KosSL, and the further development of deaf education. A big step was taken on 29 September 2010, when the Government of the Republic of Kosovo made a decision to formalize Sign Language in the Republic of Kosovo (WFD, 2010). The decision was based on the constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, its antidiscrimination legislation, the national plan of action for people with disabilities, and the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. When the decision was announced by email, the Office of the Prime Minister expressed its thanks to the KAD and other national and international experts who helped to finalize the process. Furthermore, a joint effort for developing a 3–5 year development strategy for the education of the Deaf started in 2011, as a collaboration between the Kosovo government, the education sector and the KAD. The strategy is to include criteria for qualifications for **teachers' sign language skills**; curriculum development for KosSL as a mother tongue; developing teaching resources; and developing a class assistant and sign language instructor program. The DVD dictionary was launched in September 2012 at a seminar arranged by the Office for Good Governance,

Human Rights, Equal Opportunities and Gender Issues within the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo.

## **Appendix 1:**

**Visual documentation of workflows of the work with the dictionary in the KosSL project**



Linguistic data is collected through video interviews



Backups of the interview are made





Signs are excerpted from the video data



The sign in question is re-filmed



A sketch of the sign is drawn from the computer screen



Finalizing of the sketch



Photocopying for making sign file cards



Information about the sign is noted on the file card



A working group is discussing the sign entry, the form of the sign, and its variants



The Kosovar Sign Language Working Group



Processing the sign files in the computer



Video shooting of the sign in the studio





Editing work on signs and example sentences



Work on the Albanian equivalents of the sign entry

## **Appendix 2:**

### **Interviewees and persons involved in the focus group discussions:**

#### KAD staff

Mr. Nebih Cakaj, Deaf, Sign Language Researcher Assistant

Mr. Ramadan Gashi, Deaf, Liason Officer

Ms. Rukije Gashi, hearing, Advocacy Officer

Mr. Selman Hoti, hearing, Interpreter Trainer

Mr. Enver Kurtalani, Deaf, Project Administrator

Ms. Drita Toprlak, Deaf, Sign Language Researcher Assistant

#### Deaf Working group members

Mr. Liridon Gashi, from Gjakovë

Ms. Elma Hasani, from Prizren

Ms. Kimete Haziri, from Gjilan

Mr. Faton Parduži, from Vushtrri

#### Hearing teachers at Nëna Terezë deaf school in Prizren<sup>21</sup>

Ms. Nurten Bilurdag

Ms. Imellda Dervishi

Ms. Lumnija Morina

Mr. Muharem Vërmica

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<sup>21</sup> At the request of the teachers, the quotes in the text have been anonymized.

## Appendix 3:

### Topics of the interviews and focus group discussions

#### Language attitudes

- The importance of KosSL (for you)
- Deaf as a minority in relation to the hearing majority
- KosSL use in Deaf education and among children
- KosSL linguistic variation – variation in relation to e.g. region, gender and age
- The importance of a sign language dictionary

#### Language use

- Domains of use of KosSL in the Kosovar society
- Potential users of KosSL, and the importance of sign language skills of hearing parents, teachers and interpreters
- Differences in the KosSL skills among Deaf, and hearing **people's signing skills**
- Acquisition of sign language in Kosovar Deaf children today – do they learn from other children at school or through signing communication with their hearing parents prior to school
- A future with KosSL used at the Deaf school – a method of bilingual education

#### Personal experience of the work done

- Your view on KosSL before and during the project (after the received training)
- Opinions of the Sign Language Work done
- The structure of Sign Language Work – two research assistants and a working group
- The important of having the community represented in the working group
- The relationship (and trust) between the working group members and the research assistants
- The communication with the foreign linguistic advisors – language learning and respect for your culture



- A comparison of the work process between the present Sign Language Work and the work on the *Broshura e Gjuhës së Shenjave*
- The experience of teaching sign language to the hearing teachers in the Deaf school in Prizren
- Your experience of the workshop arranged by World Federation of the Deaf in March 2006
- The group discussions, e.g. the decision of the English and Albanian acronyms for Kosovar Sign Language

#### Project impact

- The work done by Kosovar Association of the Deaf for the community
- The activities of Sign Language Work in relation to the work of the Kosovar Association of the Deaf – e.g. in linguistic lobbying activities or in sign language interpreter training
- The impact of Sign Language Work done on the status of KosSL
- Connections between an improved status of KosSL and an improved status of Deaf people
- Future visions - the KosSL situation in Kosovo after 20 years

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# Language Vitalization through Language Documentation and Description in the Kosovar Sign Language Community

## Karin Hoyer

This study on language vitalization and community empowerment in the Kosovar sign language community focuses on linguistic work taking place within the framework of a development co-operation project between two NGOs in Kosovo and Finland. The long-term objectives were to improve the status of Kosovar Sign Language (KosSL) and to guarantee the human (linguistic) rights of Deaf language users – for them to obtain access to society on an equal basis with other citizens.

This was implemented through lobbying for legal recognition of KosSL and by advocacy work directed at governmental authorities. One of the central activities in the project was to conduct basic documentation and description of KosSL, and provide linguistic training for representatives of the sign language community.

The study has implications for similar language vitalization work in sign language communities, including the importance of raised language awareness, involving the whole community, and Deaf role models in the implementation of the work. Methodological issues dealt with a range of different topics; from the relationship between the language community and the outside advisor, to language use and everyday working methods. Partnership-enhancing methods had a significant influence on the success of the project, and resulted in community members' ownership of the work.



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