

ESWS: The first European SignWriters Symposium.

Report by Kathleen Heylen.

The questions in this report were derived from the videotapes we made at the ESWS.

Summary of the questions:

Here are some of the questions and issues that came up during the symposium.

These questions can be a guideline for the next ESWS...

Education

.using SW to teach phonology and morphology: can SW show the different locations in the signingspace?

.if you teach Sign language which of the 3 text is possible:

1. a text in SW with some words next to specific signs.

2. a text in English with some signs below the word.

3. a full text in English with a sign below every word. (Signed English)

.SW for lefthanded or righthanded signers: the influence on reading and writing in SW

.using "quotes" in SW

.writing dialogues in SW

.different didactics to teach Sign language and SW

.do we use the top-bottom method or bottom-top method to teach SW?

.curriculum to teach Sign language and implement SW into such a curriculum

.SW should be researched by a Sign Linguist before we use it in education?

.how much detail do we need to write when we use SW in education?

.Is SW a written language? Does it have all the aspects of a written language?

Computer

.The difference of using a mouse or keyboard when using a programme for SW

.is it possible to translate a text of any written language into a Sign language text, with the correct grammar of that SL?

.how much does a programmer need to know about SW to be able to create a SW programme?

.possibility to look up signs by typing a word/ and look up words by giving symbols

.how to make documents containing SW smaller in MB?

.how can children use a programme to make SL sentences? NOT by typing in the words in the spoken language BUT using SL grammar...

.the possibility of transferring data from one programme to another.. saving a lot of time.

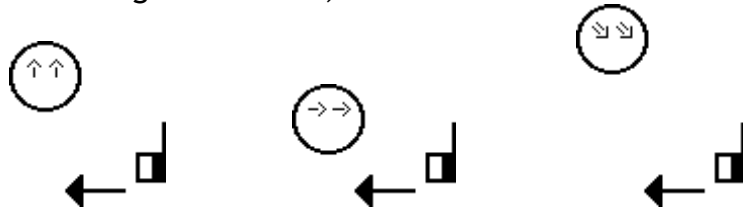
The participants came from all over Europe and some even further. Belgium, France, Ireland, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Holland, Switzerland, Canada and Japan.

The first day started of with a BIG surprise for all the participants. We contacted Valerie Sutton with the use of a videophone 'D-link' that Daniel installed for us. Valerie greeted all 29 participants and wished us an informative and happy time.

***First talk on education was by Kathleen Heylen**, who teaches VGT (Flemish Sign Language) at the Kasterlinden school for the Deaf. ([Powerpoint presentation](#))

This presentation contained:

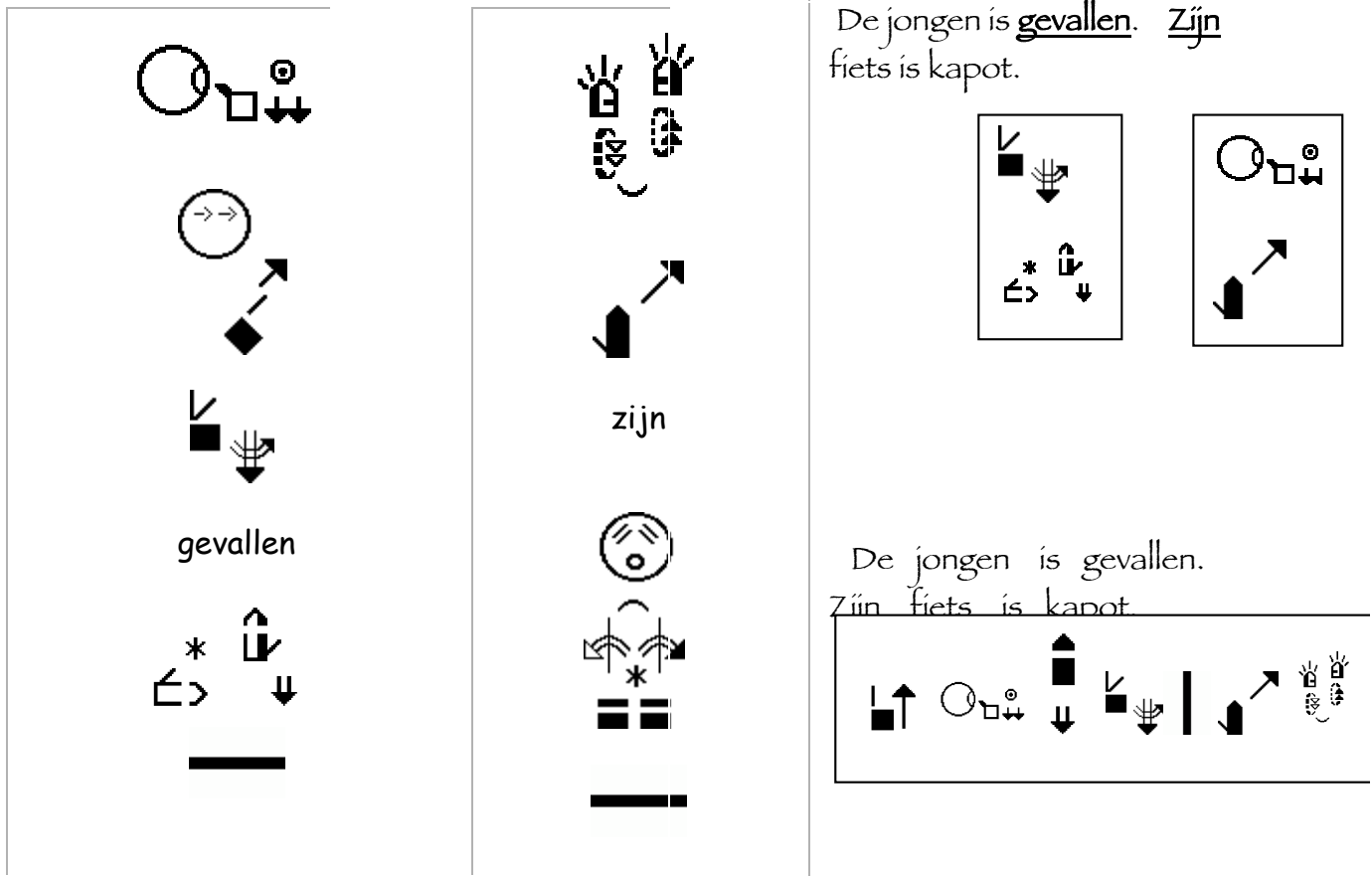
- .How do we work with SignWriting in the classroom?
- .examples of how SignWriting is used to teach VGT to the pupils.
- .DVD fragments from the classroom
- .some personal questions regarding using SW to read and write VGT:
 - ? The use of signing space is not always clear enough in SignWriting according to Kathleen,



The height of the sign can have morphological meaning, a dog is situated lower than a man.

?Kathleen also showed 3 examples of using SW in combination with the spoken language. 3 options showed

1. a text in SW with some words next to specific signs.
 2. a text in English with some signs below the word.
 3. Kathleen wanted to know if people agreed with a full text in English with a sign below every word. (Signed English)
- She asked the participants which of these 3 options they preferred.



***The second talk was by Stefan Wöhrmann**, who teaches Deaf children at a school for the Deaf in Osnabrück, Germany.

This presentation contained:

- .a DVD section of a German tv program that was made by Deaf people on SignWriting. This gave an general idea how Stefan works with SW in his classroom.

Stefan added mouthmovement to SignWriting, he uses this to help the children practice articulation.

"Speed of reading is very important to understanding what you read", Stefan said. He uses SW to write Sign Language grammar as well as the grammar of the spoken language.

***The general discussion led by Ingvild Roald** (Norway) raised some issues and questions.

Alessio (Italy) pointed out the difference in reading and writing: he had question about transcription of signs into SignWriting.

Different people raised questions about:

Dialogue?

Detail for reading?

How much difference should there be between actual signing and the written form?

Various usage for SignWriting:
-transcribing sign for research
-writing for education
-dictionary

On the first and second day we had a workshop: issues on using SW in education.

? Does it matter if the signer is lefthanded or righthanded? We questioned the influence on reading or writing SW according to the dominant hand. Are lefthanded signs mirrored or do they have a very different movement than righthanded signs? Is it easier for lefthanded children to read SW if it's written that way, or can they read the righthanded signs? And do they make mistakes reading the righthanded signs?

? Alessio posed a question on quotation in SW. In written English you have symbols for quotes like this: Mary says "hello, I'm Mary". How would this work in SW?

? This resulted in a discussion on how to write a dialogue between 2 or 3 or more people in SW?

You can have a dialogue with 'me' as a participant in the dialogue or 'me' as the observer of a dialogue. We came to some suggestions:

- .color or difference in thick or thin writing
- .use facial expression in SW (hair or facial expression to mark a person)
- .first print the name of the person or maybe a new symbol to indicate 1 person or more

? We concluded that we also need to make a difference in how to teach Sign Language and Sign Writing to different groups:

- SW for little children (kindergarten) and primary school
- SW for older students (learning SW at a latter age)
- SW for adults and hearing students

These all require a different approach and didactics.

? Diane from Belgium had questions about at what age and in what stages you can teach Deaf children SW. The development of SignLanguage is not researched enough in many countries.

So at what age do you start teaching classifier handshapes?

Or when do you start teaching the handshapes of SW and in what order do you teach this?

What can you expect from the students and how to evaluate them (what is a normal development?)

? Should SW not be researched by Sign Linguists before we use it to educate Deaf children?

? Danny (Belgium) wondered if SW should be introduced by the 'top-bottom method' or 'bottom-top'?

*(top-bottom: starting with whole sentences and ending with spelling -
bottom-top: starting with spelling and ending with reading sentences)*

? Danny also pointed out if we should write SW in extreme detail or do children pick this up very global (no need for too much detail and mouth pictures?) Should children be reading more in context instead of focussing on the details.. as Stefan said - 'speed of reading is very important'.

There was a discussion on the use of SW. For Deaf children who learn it as the written form of their first language it should not be a system to teach SL... first comes SL then comes SW.

? But is SW a written language?-Does it have all the aspects of a written language?

Louis-Félix (Canada) stated that a spoken language is not linked to written languages, we teach the children the meaning of these symbols we call 'letters'. SW is much easier according to Louis-Félix because the symbols of SW resemble the parts of a sign.

Kathleen noted that SW is also arbitrary because the handshapes do not look like actual hands, and the children have to learn these symbols and meaning for orientation, movement, facial expressions, etc...

? Juliette (France) signed that teaching with visual images or SW is very different and that teaching of culture and language is connected. How many cultures and languages can Deaf children take? And in which order?

*On the first and second day we also had a computer workshop.

? Daniel (Switzerland) showed the possibility of using the keyboard or mouse. He noted that the keyboard has the advantage of speed.

Suzanne (Holland) asked what problems to expect while making a programme for SW

Lars answered that translating DOS into a new programme can be a problem.

.DOS limited to 10.000 symbols

.Translating old symbol bank into a new programme

Daniel signed that Lars' programme is very interesting, but would he please translate it to English.

? The 'big' question of course is the possibility to translate text from a spoken language into a sign language and vice versa.

? there was a brief discussion on symbols and how to write attention in a handshape. Daniel thought this was not a topic to discuss in the computer workshop. Louis-Félix noted that the symbols available and needed influence the creating of a programme and so should be discussed. Damien (Belgium) asked if you have to

know a language to be able to write it down or create programmes? He pointed out the difference between designers and users.

***Day 2: Daniel's talk on the Tiger programme.**

(D-link ad) for further questions about Tiger please contact Daniel at d.noelpp@gmx.ch

Website? <http://www.signwriter.org/>

Questions or remarks following Daniel's talk (which is much better explained by Alessio ;)

? Claude (Belgium) asked if the D-link videophone was part of the presentation? Daniel sells these and we think he wanted to use this opportunity to make a buck or two ;)

Was D-link made by Deaf people? Is it for Deaf people or also for hearing people. Apparently it was made by Deaf people for Deaf/hearing people.

? Danny wanted to know if it's possible in the Tiger programme dictionary to convert SW text to it's spoken language? Or only one word to one sign? Daniel responded that for now it's one word to one sign translation.

? Ingvild wondered about printing possibilities.

? Barbara (Italy) asked Daniel if he did this as volunteer work? Daniel created this programme together with his brother, voluntary. Barbara also asked if she could use the programme on Mac and linux? And Daniel signed it shouldn't be a problem.

***Lars' talk on the Python programme.**

<http://signwriter.takdoc.de>

Not all the subprogrammes are developed yet.

Questions:

? Juliette: Can you type in a word and have the sign pop up but not the other way around?

Stefan explained that signpuddle has this search option that lets you search a sign by handshape and orientation. Different signs pop up if you search general, more detail give you less signs as a result.

Danny showed this website <http://ugent.gebaren.be> the Flemish dictionary converts words into different variations of signs (different signs for rabbit).

Kathleen showed how she uses signpuddle to make lessons and how the students use it. <http://signbank.org/signpuddle/sgn-BE-nl/>

The problem here is that every gloss of a sign has to be linked to a word. So if you want to use the translation in signpuddle you have to know the word connected to the signs. How do you save different variations of signs in signpuddle. And how can it be easy for everyone to use this.

? She also posed the problem that using Word files with SW are 'big MB' files. And SW takes up lots more space on a paper than words do. Stefan has made some examples where SW documents are fitted on a page a lot 'smaller'.

? If the children want to make a text in VGT (Flemish Sign Language) they have to type in the text with Dutch words but in VGT grammar. That can be confusing, so we need a different way of working to make VGT texts with the pupils.

? Barbara: If I have a database already filled to convert it to Swnl. When will Lars be finished with his work?

? Danny: So it will be possible to be able to translate spoken language text into Sign Language grammar?

There was a discussion on creating a European organisation the ESWO (European SignWriters Organisation)

Ingrid had the draft constitution handed out to everyone.

The questions the ESWO participants had when the ESWO was introduced.

? Do we need an ESWO? Why?

? What will this organisation provide?

? What is the difference between being on the comité and being a member, information where?

Reports from participants

Report by Lucy:

Well, before the symposium we were told via e-mail that there would be two workshops groups at the symposium, the spelling one held by Stefan and Sara, and the computer workshops held by Lars and Daniel. Well, I wanted to participate in all the workshops in order to write an article for Swiat Ciszy afterwards. But Kathleen informed me it wouldn't be possible as the spelling and the computer workshops would take place simultaneously, so I wrote to Kathleen I would be sitting on spelling the first day and on computers the second day.

But on place I saw a list at the white board with my name put under the spelling workshop for both the first and second days. I told Kathleen there was a mistake and she said I should correct it, so I transferred my name to the computer workshop that was to be held the second day.

Well, the first day I was sitting for the spelling lesson held by Stefan and Sara. I could follow Stefan very well but what he was teaching I and most of other participants were familiar with. Stefan was teaching so as if we were kids. It was valuable in a way as we could see how children are taught but for on the other hand it was boring to us. A film showing the teaching of SW to young pupils would be as valuable too but we (at least I) wanted to discuss some deeper issues.

Well, the same day there was also a computer workshop by Lars and I went to it as I just wanted to see what would happen there and so on and I hoped to learn something too as some time before I had downloaded Lars' program but it did not work on my computer. But it was so that Lars was speaking English, and one of the ISL interpreters was interpreting Lars but I could not follow him as both the interpreters spoke (signed) a language quite foreign to me. Daniel was sitting there by me and I asked him to do something with Python so that it could work but he failed.

(at last Lars helped me during a break - thank you, Lars!)

The next day there was new grouping but I had only a faint idea of it and in order to make sure of the groups (as far as I could understand, there were 3 groups then) I asked Stefan, using some signs and English words, if he was going to teach the basics again. He agreed so I followed another group as I didn't want to exercise the basics in the childish way again...

I know very well I was not prepared very well for the meeting but the fact was also that I did not know how I should be prepared as it was the first international SL users meeting in my life...

After all, I hoped for some more written English information as written English is the easiest way to communicate with foreigners. Those who could not understand the International Sign, could hear and understand spoken English and I could not understand either this or that. I felt adrift... (Val told me she was expected to

prepare more materials in SW but do not forget: in order to read in ASL you must know ASL!)

I think, if I participated in the Maastricht congress, I would have some time to learn the International Sign as I did in Brussels but the symposium lasted only 2 days, too few to learn much although the third day, after the symposium, it was much easier to me to communicate with Daniel, Ingvild and Ulrike at the hotel and in the city of Brussels (I met Daniel in the city on Saturday). But communicating in person is not the same yet as "listening" to a speech...

Stefan, you were confused because I did not ask for more when you saw my signs written incorrect. Well, it was during the break and I did not want to take your time, I know we all were tired, more or less. Most of you came from Maastricht, some (including me) did not sleep very well at that hotel in Groot Bijgaarden and some few (especially me) came from afar, by air and I did not felt very well after the flight, especially after the flight from Brussels to Warsaw, unfortunately.

And now I have a problem.

I have promised my boss to write an article about the symposium for the Swiat Cisy magazine. In order to do it I need your help (or does anyone want to be a co-author of it?)

1. What is the exact number of participants and what countries did they represent? (I've got a list but it's incomplete or out of date, perhaps).
 2. What about the European SignWriter Organisation? Has it been already established? Was it a SW or ESWO symposium at all?
 3. When and where will be the next SW/WSWO symposium?
 4. What were the main issues raised by the participants?
- I would be grateful if you answered these questions in brief. I may have some more questions later.

Lucy Dlugolecka

Report by Alessio:

21 JULY (1st day) --

In the morning, after the usual stuff (registration, opening and so on), Kathleen Heylen, from Belgium, and Stefan Wohrmann, from Germany (sorry Stefan, I'm no good at hunting diacritic marks under Linux), presented their talks on "education and sign writing techniques".

Ms. Kathleen's talk was centered mostly on her experience in teaching children how to write down Belgian sign language, within the context of a bilingual primary school. She started 2 years ago, with the aim to give children the chance to learn how to read and write in their own sign language. It seems that the implicit objective of her project is to help them reinforce awareness and knowledge of their own sign language. In her talk she showed not only some of the exercises she gave children, but also 5 relevant points of her work with the children:

- 1) phonology (i.e. use of colors and "minimal couples" to mark different elements of a sign)
- 2) morphology (i.e. the use of polysyntactic signs, as Kathleen defines what we'd call roughly "classifiers")
- 3) syntax (i.e. making visible the change of meaning between two slightly different SL sentences)
- 4) semantics (i.e. marking the differences between synonyms and/or homonyms)
- 5) pragmatics (i.e. awareness of different linguistic registers such as formal/informal signs)

Stefan Wohrmann's talk was apparently similar to Kathleen's but his aims are a bit different: he uses signwriting and/or "mundbildschrift" to reinforce knowledge and understanding of written/spoken German, by using elements of German sign language as starting points for learning written/spoken German as a second language.

After lunch (btw, the subs were good! :), two discussion groups were formed. One was focused on SW spelling, led by Stefan Wohrmann and Sara Geudens, the other on SW Technology and Computer, with Trevor Jenkins as moderator.

Alessio attended the first discussion group, Barbara the second.

SW Spelling discussion group:

Initially, the moderators (Stefan and Sara) tried to teach us how to read and write SW symbols, but since most of its participants already knew how to read and write SW, we split into 2 sub-groups: one for people that really didn't know much about SW and another for people with more experience in SW.

I (Alessio) attended the latter group, where we discussed on what would be the best learning process for SW and children. Some people in the grouplet

disagreed on using SW only as a "supporting code" for written languages. Then we discussed on how to write into SW a dialogue between 2 people, as in other written languages that have punctuation symbols. An agreement was somehow found: each sentence uttered should be preceded by the signer's sign-name.

During this discussion, Juliette from Toulouse (France) described her recent experience of working for about 1 or 2 months with a very small group of deaf children in a bilingual school in her town: the aims of her project were quite similar to Kathleen's project, but differing in the "educative process", as Juliette never used PC for printing or writing SW and, to make children more acquainted with SW, she gave them not only reading exercises but also lot of writing exercises.

SW Computer/Technology Group:

It initially started as a lesson by Daniel Noelpp on how to use SignWriter DOS to write down signs, since it shares a lot of features with SW Java and SW Tiger. But the lesson soon became a discussion in itself, since there were some participants that didn't know SW at all, while others already knew bot SW and SW-DOS. After the short afternoon break, those participants joined the abovesaid sub-group to learn more about SW itself, so the remaining people continued discussing on where and how is going software development for SW in the near future... (I, Barbara, must admit that I might have been a bit monomaniac on the problem of using SW software for Sign Language research purposes :p)

22 JULY (2nd day) --

The morning talks were given by Daniel Noelpp and Lars Majewski, who described their work on, respectively, Sign Writer Tiger and Sign Writer Python.

Daniel has briefly explained what Sign Writer Tiger can do at the present stage of development (e.g.: it can read and write SW documents, but it can't yet print them and it can't manage dictionaries) and explained that this is due to the fact that it isn't YET finished. Then he described what would be the future features of SW Tiger, as its development proceeds. One of the "snags" of SW Tiger development, if I understood correctly, is the fact the symbol set of SW is still in evolution, it hasn't been carved into stone like Moses'tables.

Lars Majewski, in presenting his SignWriter Python, has explained that this too is still under development, and for this reason his project has a "modular" nature, with 5 small programs, each doing a specific task related to SignWriting. Of those 5, only 2 are already ready and downloadable: the Dictionary Browser, a program that loads and displays SW dictionaries made with SW-DOS, and the SignFile Viewer, another programs that can load, display and export as graphic files old SignWriter files. The other 3 would be called SignFile Creator, SignEditor and SignWriter.

After lunch, we gathered back into the same discussion groups as yesterday.

The SW group discussed over the following topics:

- Why SW is already perceived as written language, even if it's not yet "recognized" by deaf community? Even if SW contact happens with deaf children first?
- How would SW evolve with its usage with one's own sign language within the deaf community?

Obviously, due to the nature of the topics raised, no conclusion was reached... yet :-)

The other group of discussion expanded upon the morning talks, especially on what would be necessary to help both Daniel Noelpp and Lars Majewski, who are actually working alone on their programs' development. Some beta-testers (people that don't panic if their program freezes or crashes and can send back to developers what they did do to crash the program and what actually happened) and some other people that can write code in Java or Python would be surely appreciated by Lars and Daniel. We then discussed of the need not only of programs that can write/display/print SW texts, but also of programs that can ease up SL researchers's work (like transcribing and analyzing different features of signed texts, but using SW symbolset and not various conventions/artifices "borrowed" by roman alphabet).

Then, after group discussions, we gathered back together for a collective discussion on the idea of creating an european organization of sign writers (ESWO), but the discussion didn't reach a reliable conclusion maybe due to the apparent "suddenness" of this ESWO idea, in some of the participants' perception, and to the fact that we were all tired (some DID celebrate the 175th anniversary of belgium the evening before...). So the details and the nitty-gritty work of establishing ESWO and how will be discussed later, by email.

Another point of discussion raised was to decide how would be the frequency of subsequent european symposiums on SW, yearly or every 2 years. After some arguing and discussion, the majority of the participants agreed on "every 2 years". So there. Next symposium will be in 2007, probably in London. Not in august, hopefully :)

any error, omission, misunderstanding is solely our own responsibility, mine and of Alessio :-) And any error in translating is my responsibility only. So sue me :)

P.S.: our deepest thanks to Val for donating the cd-rom of "lessons in SignWriting"!!!

Alessio Di Renzo