WHAT IS SIGN WRITING?

Sign Writing (Sutton’s SignWriting) is a system that gives the ability to write Sign Language - any signed language. It is part of a larger system, Sutton’s Movement Writing, which the ability any and all movements that humans (or even animals) can do.

The system consists of a large number of symbols, so that anyone can write what they need to write. But the system is made up of a small group of ‘building blocks’, which are put together in a logical and consistent manner.

In contrast to other systems that are invented for writing signed languages, SignWriting is based on movements, handshapes and other parameters in a 2-dimensional pattern. This means that it is not linear, like the Stokoe system or HamNoSys. Nor is it written from the perspective of the listener, which is as everyone (or even animals) can do.

As this system is not made especially for researchers, it is also used as everyday writing system by some Deaf people around the world. This is the only system currently available for such use. Still, the system is not fully developed, this means that when the system has been in use for a longer period of time, it will probably be simplified and adapted to the Sign Language for which it is used.

A student is translating from German Sign Language (DGS) to German.

SOUTH-AFRICA

At Fulton School for the Deaf, outside Durban, I met in 2000 one of the two deaf teachers in South Africa, Ingrid Foggett. I showed her a little about SignWriting, and the URL.

Since then the school has used this in its teaching, where they have 11 different signed languages and also a number of spoken languages.

Ingrid Foggett says: the reason I decided to get involved in SignWriting and experiment in it is rather simple: I am an educationalist and anything that furthers the education of ANY group of people deserves looking into. I do not know enough about SW to be able to go deep into this but I think that the reason above is enough? Well, well, if you are NOT convinced :) then I have another reason that no-one can argue: I showed some samples of SW (gained from the Internet) to the kids. The response was overwhelming — I cannot say NO to a response like that. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The secret of education is respecting the pupil” — Something I like to aspire to.

In Germany, SignWriting is also used to learn deaf children to speak and lip read German spoken language.

Especially at the school in Osnabrück, where many of the children come from families with other home languages, this method has been used with great success.

In Belgium,

Both Flemish-Belgian and French-Belgian schools now use SignWriting.

In Nicaragua,

Here, the researchers have been able to see the birth and growth of a new Signed Language.

Deaf children get to meet this Sign L, as their first language, both written and signed. There are now many books in this new born Sign Language. The books have a clear pedagogical profile. That is, there is a progression in their complexity, and they give a lot of grammatical and other information in their funny stories. - Some adult deaf persons, who never got the opportunity to get to school when they were young, now use only Sign Language. The children go on to learn Spanish as well.

Frank and Judy Shephard-Kegel are responsible for this work. An MA thesis has been written on testing of literacy. (see more on SignWriting’s homepage)

In the USA, many schools and educational programs in the USA use SignWriting. At the school in Albuquerque in New Mexico an experiment was conducted that resulted in a doctoral thesis.

Dr. Cecilia Flood in her dissertation describes how each of the students had an experience of Epiphany , which gave them the ownership of their own written expressions.

SignWriting is used both in lessons in Sign Language, and in other subjects. The students write partly by hand, and partly by computer. In the computer there is also a dictionary, which gives the students a picture of the right way to write the sign, and in addition can control if they have grasped the English expression correctly.

In South Africa, Ingrid Foggett.

Here Deaf and hearing adults together have made quite a lot of literature, both for education and for the joy of reading. The first novel ever to be written in any signed language is published here. They also have booklets on cancer, about Pedro Ponce de Leon who pioneered deaf education, and lots of other topics.

Responsibility for this work are Steve og Dianne Parkhurst, who are with the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

In Spain,

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