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Romanian Deaf Sign Languages Projects - an Overview

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Abstract:

In the last years, some foundations working with teams of willing teachers from Romania have developed projects involving Romanian deaf sign language, with the hope that his kind of projects will improve the integration of the persons with hearing disabilities in all the aspects of social life. The authors are making a review of the existing projects involving Romanian deaf sign languages from past and present, describing the progress made in the last years and suggesting possibilities for future possible developments. Main conclusion is that the effort of developing projects for deaf involving Romanian Sign Language (RSL) are meritorious but there is a lot of space for new future projects. These conclusions open possibilities for a lot of possible future research projects directions in Romania, such as deaf sign language applications or translation systems, made with the help of the computers.

Keywords:

sign language, romanian sign language, deaf sign language, deaf sign projects, deaf sign translations

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1. The Romanian Sign Language

The Romanian Sign Language (RSL) has been by far the most dominant and preferred means of communication by the approximately 25,000 hard-of-hearing people living in Romania (according to the National Authority for the Persons with Disabilities, 2006) and for the approximately 2,000 living in Bucharest (Barbu, 2011).

According to Mr. Mihai Grecu, President of the Romanian National Association of the Deaf, there were 31,000 members registered by the organization in 2010 in 34 subsidiaries and seven branches throughout the country (Mihai Grecu - Jurnalul National, 2010). Around 7 % of them are deaf children with deaf parents learning RSL as their first language (<http://www.eaea.org/doc/EUDECU.pdf>). That is about 0.08 % of the entire population. As for the rest of the deaf, various different causes such as: accidents, illnesses, bad medical treatments, etc, may have impaired their hearing.

The number of people who use RSL includes family members and friends of the deaf, people from special deaf educational environment, individuals with research or social roles, which makes the number of the RSL users larger than the number of deaf. This means that approximately 1.4-2% of the Romanian population use RSL, with 0.08% using it as their first language. Audionova, leader company in manufacturing hearing instruments, claims that from 1999 to the present, they have sold 2.5 millions hearing-improving devices, which unfortunately shows that the number of people with hearing disabilities is very large (Barbu, 2011), and if only some of them partially used RSL, it would mean that the figures of the RSL users presented may be even greater.

On 9th November 1919, the Friendly Society of Deaf-and-Dumb in Romania was founded (under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Mary), and its main goal was to defend the interests of deaf people and help them. Since 1953, the Romanian Association of the Deaf has been financed by the State (Ministry of Health and Social Protection). Since 1995, after the National Conference of the Association, the "National Association of the Deaf" has fallen under the coordination of the National Directory Council (Mihai Grecu - Jurnalul National, 2010, disponibil la <http://www.jurnalul.ro/starea-de-sanatate/asociatia-nationala-a-surzilor-din-romania-552670.htm>)

2. Sign Language National Projects in Romania

2.1. TRAINING the teaching staff in schools for the hearing impaired

"TRAINING teaching staff in schools for the hearing impaired" is a POSDRU project started by Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca on 1st October 2010 and is due to end on September 30th, 2013. The aim of the project is to develop teaching skills using sign language and IT tools. The general objective is the training of the teaching staff in schools (ISCED 0-3) by developing the abilities to use RSL (Romanian Sign Language) and ITC (Information Technology and Communications) support to enhance the quality and compatibility with the needs of the class and teaching effectiveness. The project also includes the development of an IT education system in order to improve teachers training in schools for the hearing impaired, including an e-learning portal (<http://lett.ubbcluj.ro:4646/>);

The development, the supply and the accreditation of the uninterrupted training programs for teachers in schools for the hearing impaired using RSL will have three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced level (with computer support). The project includes the design, the organization and the evaluation of teaching - ISCED 0 -1 and ISCED 2-3 and also ITC (Information Technology and Communications) in educating the deaf. Education units will have their own teacher training including European innovative educational practices where the concern for special education is a priority for the hard-of-hearing. Education units will benefit from teachers with high professional skills, adapted to the needs of children/students with hearing disabilities. It is expected that such schools would become attractive and their number expand into elite units (<http://lett.ubbcluj.ro:4646/Home/Prezentare>).

2.1. Networking in Sign Language

"Networking in Sign Language" is the title of a project with the following keywords: Information and Communication. The project was the initiative of "June 1st, 2001 Buzau Association" from Buzau under the name - "The Training Center for an Independent Living with Sign Language". The project was local and its beneficiaries were the deaf-and-dumb from Buzau County. The project was carried out from October to December 2007, and, through this campaign, was intended to facilitate

the access to public information for the local deaf-and-dumb public by translating in sign language the local news TV broadcast by TV Buzau station.

2.3. Defeat Silence Project!

Defeat Silence is another project aimed to improve the communication between the doctor and the deaf patient. There are various problems related to finding and keeping a job, to personal and educational development, stigmatism and social exclusion for those with hearing impairments. What is more, it has been common knowledge the fact that doctors have problems in obtaining personal data, antecedents and current disease characteristics from a deaf patient. If a child becomes deaf before learning to speak, he/she becomes silent, that is deaf-and-dumb (<http://fasmr.ro/node/28>).

Therefore, Defeat Silence, an umbrella grouping national and transnational projects, aims to achieve its goal reaching the following objectives:

- organizing courses and workshops of initiation into sign language for young/senior doctors;
- creating a web platform with online courses in the fundamentals of sign language, addressed to both young/senior doctors and also auxiliary medical personnel.

The idea of online sign language courses is based not only on doctors' need of having a specialized and accessible source of information available but also on the need of the participants to the courses and workshops to spread the information gained (<http://fasmr.ro/node/28>).

2.4. Information and Communication Laboratory for Sign Language Communication

The project was the initiative of "June 1st, 2001 Buzau Association" from Buzau and its target was to facilitate the interaction among friends and relatives of the people with speech and hearing deficiencies.

In December 2011, "June 1st, 2001 Buzau Association" received four computers designed for people with communication disabilities. The association also won three other projects in the same program, and received other 24 computers. The first four computers, which included

webcams, were offered to the beneficiaries of the association, who may interact with their friends or relatives by sign language. What the other three projects concerns, "June 1, 2001 Buzau Association" created three mini-laboratories of information and sign language communication, one of which was established at the headquarters in Buzau. Facilitating the online communication through sign language is not the only goal sought by setting up those three mini-laboratories, if we take into account the formation of joint beneficiaries, the skills in drafting web documents, which can better help them find a job.

2.5. DLMG.ro - Online Sign Language Dictionary

ANIALMG - National Association of Authorized Interpreters of Sign Language.

The organization is nonprofit, apolitical, and non-governmental with the aim of promoting authorized and qualified interpreters and their recognition on the Romanian territory.

The Association's website: <http://ailmg.ro/> at Project section recommends this link DLMG.ro - Online Sign Language Dictionary. The online dictionary has a very friendly interface with a dictionary including a section with filter by starting letter. When a word is selected, a video recording of the correspondent sign demonstrated by a human interpreter appears in the right section. When the selected word is clicked on, first time the pronunciation is heard and after that the video recording can be viewed. The online dictionary owns a search section and a contact section (<http://ailg.ro/>).

Project for gestural vocabulary standardization teachers newly employed

(Submitted by Lecturer Barbu Florea, in consultation with a team of teachers from the school for the hard-of-hearing, in Bucharest)

Several Dictionaries of RSL (Romanian Sign Language) have already been published in Romania. A first attempt to unify and standardize the RSL (Romanian Sign Language) was made by the university lecturer Ph.D. Barbu Florea with the help of teacher Negru Marieta, financially supported by the Lightintoeurope Foundation. The two are deaf. This latest material was recorded on DVD and was distributed throughout the special deaf school network in Romania. Mr. Barbu Florea has successfully used this material in sign language

seminars and courses at the State University of Pitesti and in gestural sign language courses at the Faculty of Sociology and Special Psychopedagogy from the University of Bucharest.

According to Mr. Barbu Florea, a sign language course was designed and includes 1880 words/signs. These words/signs have been photographed and captions explain how to correctly make the signs, according to a specific grammatical structure, taking into account the configuration of the hand, hand movement, palm orientation and location of contact. This content is to be used by teachers who have recently been employed in schools for the hard-of-hearing.

3. Sign Language International Projects with Romanian participation

3.1. European Deaf Culture Project, EUDECU

This project is part of Socrates program, benefiting from funding for two years (1999-2000) (<http://www.eaea.org/doc/EUDECU.pdf>). The project was coordinated by the Center for Language and Communication by Signs, represented by Asger Bergman (hard-of-hearing) and Tove Ravn (hearing) and was accomplished with the participation of delegates from the national deaf associations in Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Greece and Romania. This project was developed in two stages:

On the first stage, in 1999, a sign language information seminar was held about the situation in the above-mentioned countries, concluding with a work (Deaf, Language, Culture) printed in Denmark in order to be used by the national deaf associations.

On the second stage, in 2000, the project continued and information was gathered on sign language teaching for the parents of deaf children. The information was completed by developing the work: Teacher's Guide for Parents to Teach Sign Language.

It is worth mentioning that both works were translated by university lecturer Dr. Barbu Florea, who took part in the project, and copies were printed by the Foundation with the support of RENINCO Romania and distributed throughout the network of special schools for the deaf and National Deaf Association territorial branches in Romania (<http://www.eaea.org/doc/EUDECU.pdf>).

3.2. LINQUA 2 Project part of the SOCRATES Program 2000-2001

This project called PUZZLE has been coordinated by the University of Liege, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. It was realized with the participation of academics from prestigious universities in Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain, joined by one deaf person with experience in university education from each country. The aim has been an objective assessment of oral or written language comprehension, with the help of some pictograms in order to optimize the communication with deaf children and deaf adults or with people with speech disorders. The project has proved to be a valuable tool in assessing the capacity of understanding the sign language, oral and written, by deaf people (children or adults) (<http://socrates.um.edu.mt/lingua.html>).

4. Conclusions:

In all researches I have performed in Romania so far I could not find any major projects with impact regarding deaf sign translation systems or deaf signs avatars. Therefore, I believe that any kind of research would be welcomed in deaf sign translation system in Romanian language, particularly with regard to the following: access to public services, commercial transactions and entertainment, teaching, learning, leisure opportunities including broadcast and interactive television, e-commerce or World Wide Web. Avatars designed for this kind of communication in real-time systems should be very useful for all the above-mentioned systems.

Systems for translation from Romanian Sign Language into any other language would be very useful for the communication between Romanian deaf people and foreign deaf people.

Today, the deaf people from Romania are using mobile phones to communicate mainly by sms and, consequently, a translation system from spoken Romanian into Romanian Sign Language on mobile phone would be a very useful tool.

A Wiki Sign RO for Romanian deaf sign language would be an ideal start to build a corpus of video signs, a foundation for future developments

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*all the mentioned links were accessed and available in the period 20-30.04.2012