

## **Lexicographic projects related to Flemish Sign Language: past, present and future.**

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This contribution presents an overview of lexicographic projects related to Flemish Sign Language (VGT), the language of 5000 to 6000 Deaf people living in the northern part of Belgium (Loots et al., 2003). After lengthy negotiations, VGT obtained official recognition by the Flemish Parliament in April 2006. Whereas the recognition is a fairly recent accomplishment, the language has been a topic of linguistic research and language planning activities since the early 1990s. One domain of particular interest is the lexicon of VGT.

One of the first lexicographic projects we will discuss was an attempt at lexical unification with respect to the sign language varieties used in Flanders. VGT is made up of five regional variants and lexical variation was considered a disadvantage in deaf education and L2 teaching. Hence, in the early 90s, Signed Dutch, a way of visualising spoken Dutch by means of signs, was developed (Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2004). This led to the publication of a sign dictionary in 1995 (Buyens, 1995). However, soon after the publication, the Flemish Deaf community officially rejected the use of Signed Dutch and its 'unified' signs. The Deaf association started to promote the use of Flemish Sign Language and to work towards the official recognition of the language (Boonen, Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2004; Vermeerbergen & Van Herreweghe, 2008).

This change in attitude towards VGT led to a lexicographic project related to Flemish Sign Language itself. This research looked at the degree of lexical variation and standardization. The study confirmed that VGT has five regional varieties but also showed a considerable degree of lexical relatedness across those varieties (De Weerd et al., 2003; Vanhecke & De Weerd, 2004). This provided the knowledge and materials necessary to develop the first Flemish Sign Language/Dutch – Dutch/Flemish Sign Language dictionary. This online dictionary ([gebaren.UGent.be](http://gebaren.UGent.be)) was launched in 2004 (De Weerd et al., 2004). Another project concerned with the lexicon of VGT, which was part of the preparation of the dictionary, was a lexical modernization project. The aim was twofold: identifying lexical gaps and proposing new signs related to specific domains such as mathematics, a general subject entailing history, geography and biology and basic computer terminology (De Weerd & Rogiest, 2003a; De Weerd & Rogiest, 2003b; Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2003).

We will also introduce present initiatives related to the lexicon of VGT. The first one is the supplementation of the online dictionary launched in 2004. This work is being carried out by the Flemish Sign Language Centre (VGTC), the centre of expertise for VGT recognized by the Flemish Government ([www.vgtc.be](http://www.vgtc.be)). The Centre also supervises the development of "new" signs within the framework of sign language interpretation of the daily news and the youth journal at the public broadcasting company (VRT).

We will conclude by demonstrating how two new developments - the construction of a VGT corpus (<http://www.corpusvgt.ugent.be>) and the progress with regard to automatic gesture/sign recognition - offer new and exciting possibilities for future lexicographic projects.

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