

Deaf migrants' languaging practices and proficiency in Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS): A bidirectional effect with far-reaching implications

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The number of deaf migrants is rising, especially in urban areas such as Graz. Their diverse practices and competencies place them in a challenging position on the Austrian labor market, where recruiters value formalized language skills over multilingual and multimodal meaning-making.

This study presents results from semi-structured interviews with 12 deaf migrant signers in Graz conducted by a deaf L1 ÖGS signer. Using ELAN and MaxQDA, the interviews were analyzed for content; assessments of *general signing competence* (i.e., “functional competence”) and *formal ÖGS competence* were carried out using an adapted version of the Sign Language Proficiency Interview [1]. Results are conceptualized in a framework of (trans)languaging [2] and semiotic repertoires [3]. The participants are seven women and five men between 18 and 74 years of age from South Asia and Northern, Eastern and Southern Europe. The project team consists of the author (a hearing L2 signer), and three heritage ÖGS signers (two deaf and one hearing Coda).

The results demonstrate a correlation between better formal ÖGS competence and workplace practices that involve more sign language use ($r_s = .684$, $p = .0141$). At first glance, this may indicate the importance of the workplace for language learning. However, participants' reports suggest that the effect is also partly reversed: Signers whose communicative practices do not conform to expectations about “correct” ÖGS or German use are less likely to find employment in inclusive workplaces in Austria. This was observed even among participants whose general signing competence was rated highly, i.e., who could sign with relative ease with an ÖGS signer but who did so using resources that are not considered conventionalized ÖGS, such as context-dependent and less conventionalized resources (e.g., references to objects in physical proximity, enactment, highly iconic elements, use of digital technologies).

A widespread shortage of skilled workers has spurred efforts to make the Austrian public and private sectors more inclusive for workers with disabilities as well as migrants. Yet, of the twelve participants in this study, ten changed their field after migration, typically from work requiring professional qualifications to “unskilled work”. Besides formal language qualifications, some reasons for this include employers’ unwillingness to request interpreters and bureaucratic barriers in seeking recognition of qualifications and disability status. Thus, it can be argued that workplaces are not threatened by a shortage of workers but by a resistance to change, including the acceptance and accommodation of more diverse ways of languaging.

References

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