

# **The development and predicament of Chinese sign language**

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## **1. Introduction**

Since sign language was proved to be a completely independent language in the 1960s, many countries have started the corresponding planning work to protect deaf people's right to use it. In addition to recognizing it as an independent language through legislative means, the standardization of sign language has also become a significant part of planning of some countries, which also has spanned more than 70 years in China, but up to now, the work has been beset with difficulties and controversies, thus bringing great inconvenience for deaf schools' education based on sign language.

This paper discusses the standardization process of Chinese sign language development and some problems during it, based on the distinction of the concepts of the four categories of sign language, and then explores and evaluates the application of sign language in the classroom.

This paper is divided into five parts. In the first section, a brief introduction to the whole paper is provided including the research background and the layout of this paper. Section two functions as a detailed description of the four different concepts of sign language in China. Section three is about the standardization process of Chinese sign language and the reasons for the standardization trend. Section four is an explanation of the application and predicament of Chinese sign language in teaching. The last section serves as a conclusion.

## **2. The definition and difference of Chinese sign language**

There are four different concepts. Natural sign language as the first language of the deaf, is a language form with a certain degree of randomness naturally developed in the long-term use of daily social communication, just like the spoken language of listening people, while signed Chinese, with a relatively complete and fixed pattern, expressed word by word

according to Chinese grammatical structure, is a kind of the direct symbolization of Chinese, just like the written language. Besides, local sign language varies from region to region, just like dialects in Chinese, opposite to which is Chinese national sign language, combining the content and characteristics of natural sign language and signed Chinese, commonly used in various formal situations, just like Mandarin.

Therefore, about the definition, in a broad sense, Chinese sign language refers to all sign languages used in China, including all of the above, while in a narrow sense, it refers to the last one, Chinese national sign language, compared with the National sign languages of other countries.

### **3. The standardization process of Chinese sign language and the problems**

Why standardization? According to statistics, there are 20.57 million deaf people in China, and if each deaf person has four immediate family members, the number of people who need to use sign language should be about 100 million (Huang & Sun, 2019). However, the sign language in one place is even different from that of neighboring villages, making it more arduous for deaf people to communicate with each other and hearing people.

In the late 1950s, a set of “Sketches for the Common Sign Language of the Deaf and Mute” was sorted out and revised, which was the beginning of the standardization of Chinese sign language and later in 1979 it was named “Diagram for the Common Sign Language of the Deaf” and officially implemented. After it was renamed “Chinese Sign Language” in 1987, a sequel was edited and published in 1994. Now in 2018, “Lexicon of Common Expressions in Chinese National Sign Language” was officially promulgated, indicating that the linguistic status of sign language has been further recognized in our country.

However, there are some problems during the standardization. What it actually promoted in the past is signed Chinese that relies on the grammar of Chinese, rather than the natural sign language usually used by the deaf, actually denying its independent linguistic status in practice, so the understanding of sign language of the deaf at that time must be based on deep learning of Chinese, which is obviously a paradox, because there is no doubt that it's extremely preposterous for them to learn something new in a language they can't understand. Of course, the standardization of sign language undoubtedly reduces the learning difficulty of listening people, conducive to the promotion and dissemination of sign language, making contribution to the standardization of deaf school education, but on the other hand, some

scholars believe that standardization is a threat to the diversity and productivity of sign language and the deaf community, promoting a kind of listening hegemony to the deaf (Hanna, 2009). Therefore, compared with the original book, “Chinese Sign Language,” later in “Lexicon of Common Expressions in Chinese National Sign Language”, about 40% of the content in was retained and about 30% of the words with some changes in sign language movements, combining signed Chinese and natural sign language (Gu, 2017). Only in this way can we solve the problem that the Chinese national sign language becomes a mere formality and deaf people cannot understand it, making it recognized by the deaf.

#### **4. The application of Chinese sign language in teaching**

The debate between natural sign language and signed Chinese is also reflected in the real classroom. Not only did the curriculum of deaf schools fails to deal with the relationship between them, but also some teachers in deaf schools admitted that they could not understand the grammar system of natural sign language. Some teachers believe that there is no unified standard for natural sign language with randomness, which varies greatly from region to region, so if natural sign language is used for teaching, it will disturb the accuracy of written language expression of deaf students and negatively affect the assessment rate of the subject taught (Ji, 2013). Hence, it is clear that the current deaf school education is in an awkward situation of language gap between teachers and students. Some researchers investigated the use of natural sign language in a deaf school and found that the effect was not ideal. Only 18% of the teachers could understand the natural sign language of the deaf students, 31.2% of the deaf students could understand the natural sign language of the teachers, and 18% of the teachers and 9.4% of the deaf students could not understand the natural sign language of the deaf students at all (Ji, 2014). That is to say, many students have a vague comprehension of the sign language used by teachers, and sometimes they even misunderstand each other, seriously affecting the teaching and learning effect.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The standardization of Chinese sign language has made great achievements, especially in recent years, but in view of the current difficulties in the development, enough attention should still be paid to school education for the deaf. First, China should promote the gradual improvement of relevant curriculum with deaf students as the center. Second, vigorously train

teachers of sign language, especially teachers of the complex and elusive natural sign language. Third, it is necessary to grasp the balance of the proportion of natural sign language and signed Chinese while standardization, so as not to increase the learning burden for deaf students. Therefore, Chinese sign language can establish an independent linguistic status in fact, getting out of the current educational predicament. (1199)

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