A critical evaluation of sign language recognition

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Sign languages (SLs) and Sign Language Peoples (SLPs) are often not considered in the context of language policy. However, the recognition of SLs has become increasingly important on SLPs’ political agendas. SLPs’ intentions behind such campaigns have parallels with those of indigenous peoples and their rights such as the Maori and Sami and with recognition campaigns of other national linguistic minorities such as the Welsh, Gaelic and Catalan people. However, what distinguishes these campaigns from the sign language recognition campaigns is that policy makers still fail to engage with the reality of SLPs as culturo-linguistic minorities, and mistakenly view them as disability formations.

This paper offers an overview and analysis of the current state of sign language recognition legislation, the motives for and desired meaning of this recognition on the part of SLPs themselves, and the barriers they are confronted with when trying to achieve this recognition. While the research has a global reach, its specific focus is on two key ‘types’ of sign language recognition campaigns: Finland and Scotland. Inspired by spoken minority language legislation, SLPs are initiating policy for sign language legislation which is aimed to guarantee the same protection and legal status as these spoken minority languages have.

The research uses a qualitative research methodology and draws on Deafhood (Ladd 2003) and critical language policy (Tollefson 2006) as theoretical frameworks. Data are gathered through interviews with key players involved in the recognition process, participant observation and study of official documents.

References


Keywords: ”critical language policy”, ”sign language recognition”, ”language legislation”.
