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Language attitudes towards Serbian Sign Language and experiences with deaf education in Serbia

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on data obtained from interviews with 28 deaf signers and three hearing teachers of deaf pupils regarding their experiences with and attitudes towards deaf education and Serbian Sign Language (SZJ). Following transcription of the data, we conducted thematic analyses of the deaf informants' and teachers' comments. Data, which indicate that a change in language attitudes among deaf people has taken place compared to the oralist ideology still prevalent among teachers, are considered within a broader historical context by giving the first account of SZJ, its place in education and its history. In the light of the results, we highlight the importance of teacher training for promoting a cultural-linguistic minority perspective in deaf education in Serbia that would allow for deafness to be viewed as human diversity rather than disability.

Keywords

Serbian Sign Language, Serbian deaf community, deaf education, language attitudes, cultural-linguistic minority, oralism

Introduction

Serbian Sign Language (*srpski znakovni jezik* or SZJ), a largely under-documented southeast European sign language, is the language used by deaf and hearing signers in Serbia. In this paper, we aim to get a clearer picture of the perception of the cultural-linguistic status of SZJ and its place in deaf education by probing explicit and implicit language attitudes of deaf people and teachers of deaf pupils. Studies on deaf education and linguistic access in Serbia have so far failed to include deaf people's perspectives on the topic. Therefore, we attempt to address this gap by interviewing 28 adult deaf signers through SZJ. The obtained data help us observe how deaf people have experienced language in their education and what their attitude towards SZJ is. Furthermore, we interviewed three current teachers of deaf pupils about deaf education and communication with deaf pupils to get an indication of whether teachers' language ideologies correspond to or contradict those of their students.

When we talk about language attitudes we are referring to 'complex psychological entities' which reveal personal value judgements towards a language and/or users of a language or language variety (Burns et al., 2001, p. 182). All these language attitudes of deaf signers and hearing teachers build towards language ideologies. We take these language ideologies to be a 'ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity' (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 497). In this paper, we are particularly interested in the dominant ideologies of sign languages (SL) in the Serbian deaf community (SDC) and among teachers of deaf pupils. More specifically, we are interested in exploring the status of SZJ with respect to the majority language, i.e. Serbian, in deaf education. This is inextricably bound to the different perspectives that exist with regard to deafness (Matthijs et al., 2017): (i) a medical-pathological one with a focus on not being able to hear, speak, etc. which consequently needs to be repaired as much as possible, and (ii) a cultural-linguistic one with a focus on SL communities as cultural-linguistic minorities whose members self-identify as 'Sign Language People' (Jokinen, 2000).

Considering language decision making and policymakers' ideological orientation steer educational practice, the issue of language policy and planning is also important (Reagan, 2001). As 'language-planning processes take place in a sociocultural context and respond to ideological considerations and loyalties' (Cobarrubias, 1983, p. 25), we felt it was important to situate the practice of SZJ use within a history of the sociopolitical and cultural conditions that have given rise to dominant language ideologies. Attitudes towards SZJ can be observed in four periods: from the establishment of deaf schools to 1945; Yugoslavian days (1945-1991); from 1991 until 2015; and post 2015.

Before going into a more detailed account of these different periods, deaf signers' and teachers' testimonies, and insights that stem from the data, we provide a brief overview of the linguistic situation in Serbia, and the SDC today.

Serbia and societal multilingualism

The current Republic of Serbia (Figure 1) was established in 2006 after Montenegro voted in a referendum for independence from the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia has around 7,000,000 inhabitants and one official language, Serbian.



Figure 1. Serbia on the map of Europe ([Europe map Serbia], 2007).

Ethnically speaking Serbia is a heterogeneous community. Serbs constitute the majority with more than 80 %, followed by the most numerous national language minorities such as Hungarians, Romani, and Bosnians, and a number of other national language minorities (The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government of the Government of Serbia, s.d.). National language minorities in Serbia have the right to attend primary school in their mother tongue. Deaf people in Serbia are regarded as belonging either to the majority group of speakers of Serbian, or the minority groups of Hungarians, Romanis, Bosniaks or other minorities.

According to Marković (2014, p. 35), the number of deaf and hard of hearing people in Serbia is 144,648. This is the total number of people with various degrees of hearing impairment. Very few of these people would know SZJ. Further, many deaf representatives of the deaf associations say that accurate information about the number of their members cannot be determined (Allen & Walters, 2007). If prelingual deafness, which occurs at a rate of 1 per 1000 (Schein, 1989) in developed societies, is taken as a proxy for SL use, there would be around 7,000 deaf users of SZJ. However, there have been no recent demographic studies on the number of deaf people or SL users in SDC. This concurs with Schein's (1989, p. 9) observation about the sociopolitical reality of deaf people in the US: 'Not counting a group diminishes its social and political influence'.

Sign Language use in Serbia: from the establishment of deaf schools in 1896 to 1945

It is assumed that in Serbia, as in other developed societies, 90 to 95% of deaf children have hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004) with usually no knowledge of SL. Therefore, schools for deaf pupils in Serbia have been the places where many deaf children are first exposed to SZJ through contact with often older peers.

The oldest school for deaf children in Serbia established in 1896 – Stefan Dečanski – is located in the centre of the capital city Belgrade. A pioneering teacher of the school, Kosta Đ. Nikolić, who was sent to Berlin in 1882 by the Ministry of Education to be trained to work with deaf children, designed the very first curriculum for primary deaf education based on the curriculum of the Berlin institute at that time. The 'German system', established by Samuel Heinicke, is known for embracing oralism, i.e. a communication philosophy with a (nearly) exclusive focus on spoken language communication excluding the use of signing, as opposed to the 'French system' established by Charles-Michel de l'Épée that focused on education in sign (Lane, 1984). In 1896, the first Serbian curriculum for educating deaf students called for an exclusive use of the speech method (*glasovna metoda*), while 'the use of artificial finger speech (*Gebärdensprache*) as well as fingerspelling were to be excluded

in its entirety' (Vujičić, 2017, p. 19; our translation). Evidently, Serbia followed the resolution adopted at the Milan conference in 1880 by which SLs were banned or demoted as a medium of instruction from deaf education in Europe and the U.S. for nearly a century. The first Serbian school for deaf children in Belgrade was operational until 1941, when it was closed due to the outbreak of WWII (Savić, 2005).

From 1945 to the beginning of the 1990s

After WWII, the association, which would eventually become the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Yugoslavia (*Savez gluvih i nagluvih Jugoslavije* or SGNJ), was founded. During most of the second half of the 20th century, powerful oralist proponents were very influential in the field of language planning and deaf education (Savić, 2005). Being deaf was viewed as a communicative limitation. On board with this deficit-oriented approach to deafness, the SGNJ undertook an important educational role as it was very active in the printing and publication of (oral education) textbooks for deaf children. Oralist ideology was coupled with a sense of community, which meant among other things that the same way of communicating was desired in society (Savić, 2005). Thus, Serbocroatian was the norm. As the language of prestige, its symbolic values epitomized in the political, socioeconomic, and cultural superiority (Greenberg, 2004), typical of the context of majority and minority languages as illustrated by Sallabank (2013). The SL used in Yugoslavia was missing from the minority language paradigm and hence from all the official documents on language policy and planning. There is almost no mention in Serbian literature on deaf related matters of Yugoslavian Sign Language (YSL) before the 1990s or one of its varieties (e.g. SZJ). The linguistic status of YSL or the opinions of deaf people on the lack of attention to SL use were not matters of consideration in public discourse.

A new era of raised awareness: from 1991 to 2015

Political and economic circumstances led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 and, eventually, the establishment of the Republic of Serbia in 2006. In this sociopolitical and economic climate, deaf organisations in Serbia were faced with many challenges because of the war and reduced funds from the state and private foundations.

The period between 1991 and 2015 was marked by the establishment of the first interpreting agencies, inclusive education, and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on 31st July 2009. The introduction of inclusive education brought a couple of changes. First, it turned special schools for deaf children into schools that also cater to children with other special needs. Second, the number of deaf children at deaf schools started to decline as more deaf children with cochlear implants were mainstreamed without SL support (Nikolić et al., 2019). In the same way, SZJ was not documented in linguistic research and no SZJ teaching resources were developed which could be used in teacher or interpreter training programs. Despite the lack of teaching materials for prospective SZJ students and teachers, in 1997, the Serbian Association of the Deaf started holding an annual seven-day seminar on SZJ, which created opportunities for interpreters to get certified by the national association after passing an exam at the end of the seminar (Allen & Walters, 2007). The lack of formal interpreter training has left interpreters in Serbia, who are mainly children of deaf adults, approach interpreting within the machine (conduit) philosophy by focusing on the volume of signs, and not so much on meaning (Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2006) as they feel 'that sign language in Serbia has a limited vocabulary' (Allen & Walters, 2007, p. 81). This points towards an ideology that frames SZJ as an inferior form of communication rather than as a language in its own right.

The first signs of a shift in language ideology occurred through building up awareness about the cultural-linguistic model of deafness that promotes deaf identity, the use of a national SL, a particular set of beliefs, history, art, etc. and began to emerge in 2004 when the Survey team of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) visited Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Turkey to document the status and situation

of deaf people. The two-year project ended in a Forum called ‘Deaf People in the Balkans’ in Belgrade in 2006. It was the first time for many deaf people in Serbia to see YSL and SZJ being discussed as terms denoting real languages, distinct from any majority spoken language or from gesturing. The Forum remains a historical turning point in many deaf people’s lives as it introduced a powerful deaf rhetoric, which has been shown to play a significant role in deaf empowerment (De Clerck, 2007). A Serbian deaf leader (Suzie) testified to this (in personal communication) when she reflected on the moment that led to her deaf empowerment and linguistic identity by meeting global deaf leaders:

Many deaf signers, even those who were exposed to SZJ from birth used to think that SZJ was a language used by uneducated people because the teachers at school would emphasise that you were smart if you used speech and that you were dumb if you used a SL. As a result, many deaf people felt ashamed of using SZJ in public. This changed after taking part in the Balkans Deaf Forum in Belgrade in 2006 where we met with the then president of WFD and a SL linguist. The talk about language equality and real language status of SLs sparked our awakening and instilled activism. (Suzie)

After the upheaval in the 1990s, Serbia proclaimed its international orientation by ratifying the UN’s CRPD in 2009, another important milestone of the period, which equates SLs to spoken languages. The National Association used this fact as a springboard to advocate for legal recognition of SZJ. After a long process, the Serbian National Assembly passed the ‘Law on the Use of Sign Language’ (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 38/2015) on 28th April 2015.

Official Sign Language recognition in Serbia in 2015

The ‘Law on the Use of Sign Language’ was considered an important milestone within SDC even though SDC protested against the use of the term ‘sign language’ as it implies the recognition of a universal ‘Sign Language’ instead SZJ. SDC (personal communication with several SDC’s deaf leaders) sees the right to use interpreting services in public service, political life, at educational institutions and work as the most relevant aspects of the law, and considers as problematic the fact that educational linguistic rights are only defined as a possibility. The law states that ‘education at educational institutions [...] *can* (our emphasis) be done in sign language for deaf persons, in accordance with their needs, abilities and possibilities’ (Article 7 of the law), hence the use of SZJ in deaf education is not compulsory.

The law does not call for the establishment of any SZJ advisory board, nor does it enable the founding and funding of a SZJ centre of expertise as is the case with some other existing European recognition laws (for an overview of different types of SL recognition acts see De Meulder, 2016). Article 19 of the law calls in principle on research, educational and cultural institutions to assume responsibility and assist with SL promotion within their means and in cooperation with the National Deaf Association.

This reflects what Baldauf (1994) calls bottom-up ‘unplanned language-in-education planning’, exemplifying a lack of top-down commitment to a “general language planning framework.” This kind of dynamic reveals the policymakers’ discursive and vague intentions concerning the promotion and ultimately introduction of SZJ as a linguistic model for deaf students. It could be that oralist ideology that has dominated in deaf education needs to be challenged by strong evidence of a clear benefit that SL (in this case SZJ) can have for deaf children’s academic achievement (cf. for a clear call for more research on the topic see Humphries et al. 2014) for the policymaker’s position to become more assertive.

2015 – today: post-recognition

While European language standards regulated by legal acts turned into practice for a minority language such as Romani, they remained largely hypothetical for SZJ. Upon passing the ‘sign

language' law, two working groups were established at the Government of Serbia's Institute for Improving Education, one that designed a SZJ manual for training special needs' teachers and another one that designed an interpreter education curriculum. The latter consists of two modules, one designed for language training, i.e. familiarization with the aspects of SZJ grammar and the other for the acquisition of interpreter skills. However, until today we do not know of extended and cohesive efforts in researching SZJ (apart from our own research), nor of any teaching materials for SZJ. We can therefore conclude that there are very limited attempts at corpus planning dealing with questions regarding linguistic processes such as standardisation, the creation of new lexical items, dictionaries, grammar reference books etc. (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 38), which, to date, have not translated into acquisition planning.

Apart from the experimental introduction of a SZJ course as an elective course in the Stefan Dečanski school for deaf pupils in Belgrade, between 2001 and 2003, SZJ remained pushed to the margins of education. The second author of this paper served as the school's principal from 2000 to 2003 and contends that when SZJ was offered as an elective course it was met with fear and suspicion among the teaching staff, and as a result it was cancelled. Most of the teachers of deaf pupils graduated from the School of Special Education and Rehabilitation in Belgrade (FASPER) which has been an oralist ideological stronghold for decades (Savić, 2005), addressing deaf education from a medical-pathological perspective. Its professors have had an immense influence on language planning and policy for deaf people in Serbia.

In order to gauge how the abovementioned ideologies and policies have been transmitted to language attitudes in SDC, we will look in the next section how some deaf adults in Serbia have coped with SZJ deprivation over the years, how they assess their education, whether they recognise SZJ as a language in its own right, and how some hearing teachers experience working with deaf pupils today.

Research questions

This study revolves around four research question. First, what are the language attitudes of deaf adults towards SZJ? Second, what are the language attitudes of hearing educators of deaf children towards SZJ? Third, what are the school experiences of deaf adults? Fourth, what are the teachers' experiences of working with deaf children? More specifically, what are the assumptions and beliefs teachers' hold, based on their experiences of working with deaf children, that guide their practices?

Methodology

Participants

As a first step in the process, the third author, Mihailo Gordić, who is a deaf member of SDC recruited 28 deaf informants in March and April 2016 at the deaf club in Belgrade as part of a larger project of collecting corpus data for a linguistic study on SZJ (for an overview of the interviewees, see [Appendix](#)). The selected quotes stem from the individuals who were educated in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. As we were primarily interested in gauging the educational experiences and language attitudes of members of SDC, we took proficiency in SZJ as an important (though not the sole) condition for SDC membership (Reagan et al., 2020). Thus, the participants were selected beforehand based on a holistic evaluation of their SZJ fluency by relying on some of the criteria introduced by Lupton (1998) to judge and predict fluency in ASL as there are still no SZJ assessment tools.

To gain insight into the current hearing educators' perspectives on SZJ and deaf education, and compare their views with the former students', we recruited in July 2018 three female hearing teachers – Ella, Julie, and Ann (pseudonyms) – at one of the deaf schools in Belgrade. They were selected for two main reasons: (1) they were part of a very small group of teachers willing to participate in the study, and (2) their respective teaching practices span across subjects and ages. Ann works with preschool children from two to six years old, Julie

teaches subject material pertaining to Serbian, mathematics, physics, geography etc., and Ella provides auditory and speech training from preschool until the eighth grade. As such, these three teachers offer a wide range of experiences. All three of them graduated from FASPER, respectively in 1988, 1990, and 1998. As most teachers at schools for deaf pupils in Belgrade have graduated from FASPER, we wanted to see whether the oralist ideology perpetuated at FASPER is still evident in practice.

Procedure

Relying on a qualitative research design, the signers were interviewed in SZJ for about 30 minutes. All interviewees signed informed consent forms. Each session included two participants seated across from each other and a mediator (the third author who is a deaf native SZJ signer). They were seated in a triangle. Three video cameras were used to record the sessions, one filming each of the two participants and the third one capturing the entire scene. The main focus of the semi-structured interview was on education and language, while at the same time we tried to get some insights into the interviewees' backgrounds. Metadata on the participants was collected and the interviewees were asked a number of open questions about their school experiences and languages used at school (see [Appendix](#) for questions).

The three hearing teachers were interviewed together at the school they work at. The interview was audiorecorded with the teachers' permission, transcribed into written Serbian and then translated into written English. Similarly to the deaf interviewees, metadata on the teachers was collected and the teachers were asked about their experiences in working with deaf pupils, communication with pupils and the Law on the Use of Sign Language (see [Appendix](#) for questions).

Analysis

To answer the research questions, thematic analysis was used as it was considered an appropriate method of analysis, especially as this is an under-researched area with participants whose views on the topic are not well known (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis was used to gain insights into language ideologies that underly the adults' and teachers' language attitudes, experiences and practices.

The interviews were translated from SZJ into Serbian, and then from Serbian into English by the first author, Dragana Raičević Bajić. In the first stage of thematic analysis, the interviews were thoroughly, repeatedly and independently read by the first and the fourth author, Kimberley Mouvet, to improve validity. In the second stage, we coded the data around the research questions into meaningful groups using NVivo 12 as a tool. Codes were established based on the information that was given using keywords. The keywords were then aggregated up to bigger themes. NVivo automatically matches up the codes with data extracts that demonstrate that code. In the third stage, we sorted different codes into overarching themes, after which, in stage four, the theme lists of the first and the fourth author were compared, discussed and synthesized into key themes of higher abstraction.

In the next section, a summary of the results of the thematic analyses will be given.

Thematic analysis: deaf interviewees

A thematic analysis of the deaf interviewees' data revealed the following overall themes as per focus of the questions asked: SZJ as a fully-fledged language, SZJ as an in-group language, lack of SZJ knowledge in teachers, access to the contents taught, negative emotions about school experiences, education assessment, with the following subthemes: a) comparison to education for hearing, b) low expectations, and c) educational outcome.

SZJ as a fully-fledged language

The interviewees' answers to the question of how many languages they know and use reveal that they regard SZJ and Serbian as distinct languages, which could be taken as a sign of the interviewees' perception of the linguistic hierarchy that places SZJ on a par with Serbian:

I know Serbian. I can write decently [in Serbian]. SZJ, I know perfectly. (Ben)

Some of the interviewees' observation that SZJ is a language that has to be learned at school just as other languages may be taken as further proof of the interviewees' appreciation of SZJ's linguistic status:

To be able to use SZJ, they [teachers] would have to go to school to learn its grammar and get a degree, then they would be able to teach deaf students more easily. (Richard)

The explicit naming of the language as SZJ and the differentiation made between homesigns and SZJ through the reflection on how their signing evolved can serve as yet another example of the interviewees' regard for the SZJ's linguistic status:

When I was three I used homesigns. I had my own signs for grandma, grandpa. Then I started school and my signing changed. I use SZJ. I don't have real knowledge of Serbian. (Harry)

SZJ as an in-group language

The deaf interviewees' reflections on their language experience at school suggest that some signs at best are used as an auxiliary tool by the teachers while Serbian is the desirable mode of communication, especially in interactions with hearing people:

What we'd see in the classroom was written and spoken Serbian, rarely signs. Signs would obligatorily be used with spoken language. (Charlotte)

The relative language status of Serbian vis-à-vis SZJ is further confirmed by the following utterance which briefly states in what language communication between pupils and teachers proceeded:

Mostly written and spoken Serbian. There was no SZJ. (Nick)

The statements above seem to be suggestive of the medical-pathological view in which deaf people need to be 'normalized' as much as possible and resulting in the idea that communication needs to be the 'hearing way'.

As communication with hearing adults (both in the classroom and at home) was reported to be restricted to spoken Serbian supported by a few signs at best, SZJ is acquired and used mostly in school corridors, on playgrounds, and in dorms:

[I acquired SZJ] in the dorm and at school with other children. (Maria)

As such, SZJ has been relegated to informal domains but used as the primary mode of communication among deaf pupils often evoking positive emotions about their school period:

We couldn't wait for a lesson to end so that we could sign. (Suzie)

Teachers' lack of SZJ knowledge

Asked to assess the teachers' SZJ language skills, all of the deaf interviewees stated that teachers did not know SZJ even though they sometimes used some signs. However, most of the interviewees suggest that the knowledge of signs does not equal the knowledge of SZJ:

In primary school a lot of teachers used Serbian with signs, not exactly SZJ. I'm a deaf person. SZJ is my mother tongue. They [teachers] would mainly use Serbian with signs. (Yves)

Some teachers used Serbian with signs, while others used only spoken Serbian. There wasn't a teacher who used SZJ. (George)

The discussion of the teachers' SZJ skills is further emphasized in the expression of desired goals in deaf education:

I wish for the things at school to change and for the teachers to use SZJ instead of speaking. (Harry)

Access to the contents taught

Closely related to the theme of the teachers' lack of SZJ knowledge is the lack of access to the contents taught. For deaf people, language is at the very core of their education. Because the teachers do not use SZJ, deaf students are unable to understand information properly:

The teachers have to know SZJ because a lot of information flies by us. We would nod our heads and then ask the hard of hearing for clarification. (Suzie)

As the teachers rely mostly on 'written and spoken Serbian' most of the content is inaccessible:

One or two teachers use signs, others don't, they write on the board and enunciate. There are great difficulties in communication. A lot of it [contents taught] remains unclear. (Vim)

The causality between SZJ fluency on the part of the teachers and the pupils' access to the contents taught is often expressed in many interviewees' utterances as a desired goal:

I wish more SZJ was used so that we can acquire the content. The teachers should use SZJ more, and spoken Serbian less. (Ken)

Education assessment

Education assessment was one of the major overarching themes within which three interdependent subthemes emerged. One of the reappearing subthemes was comparison to education for hearing pupils:

Education for us deaf is lousy. I remember, for example, a hearing friend who was in the second grade when I was in the third, her curriculum was way more advanced even though I was her senior. I was astonished by that. There is a great difference in education between the deaf and the hearing. When I enrolled at college, I learned about many things for the first time. I had such a hard time. I struggled a lot. There were so many things I didn't know. If my education had been more difficult before, I would have had an easier time in college. It is a misconception that deaf people can't learn, they can with the appropriate training. Education for the deaf has to be changed. (Hellen)

In the above excerpt, the deaf interviewee makes an explicit comparison to education of her hearing friend, but also touches upon a possible reason for the simplification of the content at deaf schools – a belief, which she labels as a 'misconception', that deaf people by default have a hard time acquiring what is being taught to them.

The abovementioned misconception about deaf people's capabilities could provide an explanation for teachers' low expectations, another subtheme that emerged concerning the level of complexity of the tasks the teachers assign to the pupils:

When I went to school teachers taught us basic stuff. There was no in-depth planning, no complex problems to be solved. (George)

Other interviewees seem to be more inclusive in their statements by suggesting that practice is in fact a result of legislation by which teachers abide:

We'd say to our teachers: 'Here, this is what hearing children do, this is their curriculum.' And the reply we'd receive was: 'It's the ministry's decision'. It was the percentage of education envisaged for us. (Harry)

Simplified curricular content that possibly motivates low expectations has ramifications on deaf education outcomes, another subtheme, evident in denied educational opportunities as summarised by the following utterance:

Higher education was not an option for us. (Harry)

and limited career choices:

In Yugoslavia, there weren't many choices for deaf people, locksmith, tailor, etc. I think that today is slightly better. (Tamara)

Negative emotions

In reflecting on different aspects of their schooling experience the deaf interviewees reveal a number of negative emotions. Some interviewees expressed frustration for not being allowed to sign during lessons:

We had to sit still, with our hands down. That was very frustrating. (Tamara)

The lack of SZJ use in lessons evoked a feeling of dissatisfaction in most of the interviewees:

[Teachers used] spoken Serbian mainly. There was very little signing. I wasn't happy with that. (Ben)

A number of testimonies showed an accepting attitude towards the actual state-of-affairs, although having a clear idea of how the situation could be improved.

I wish for the classes to be in SZJ instead Serbian. But I guess that's the rule. (Val)

Even though Serbian was the language of instruction, it is very striking that some interviewees were self-conscious about their lack of proficiency in Serbian:

I feel ashamed that I don't understand written Serbian. (George)

A final assessment of what or if anything can be changed in deaf education revealed a defeatist attitude among some of the interviewees as illustrated by the following utterance:

Chances for change are slim. (Sophie)

The final utterances could be interpreted in the context of paternalism that has imposed the dominant rhetoric of oralism within a medical-pathological perspective. As such, this rhetoric at times becomes self-evident and unchallenged (cf. Pease, 2002).

Thematic analysis: teachers of deaf students

A thematic analysis of the teachers' responses points at hearing, i.e. the capacity to hear a spoken language, poor reading comprehension skills in Serbian, language and abstraction, and SL as an auxiliary tool as key themes.

Hearing

In line with the medical-pathological model that frames deafness as a deficit, the teachers underline deafness, i.e. the inability to hear a spoken language, as the key obstacle to procuring equality between education for hearing and for deaf students:

It's harder for deaf students [compared to hearing students] as deafness is one of the severest forms of impairment when it comes to learning. (Ella)

The teachers suggest that even children with cochlear implant, who are perceived to be in a better position, still struggle to attain the same academic level as their hearing peers.

When asked about possible reason for this, the answer was:

Hearing. Only hearing. (Ella)

The way deafness is construed within the medical-pathological discourse may seem to put too much stress on hearing rehabilitation while limiting other language and communication options. Thus, it comes as no surprise that more advanced academic skills such as reading comprehension or abstract reasoning are difficult to develop as captured by the following themes.

Poor reading comprehension skills in Serbian

The teachers suggested that the acquisition of reading comprehension skills in Serbian is particularly difficult. Referring to one of her students with cochlear implant, one of the teachers said:

[...] even though her speech was well formed, [reading] comprehension was not that easy, it takes a whole life...even children with cochlear implant have to study their whole life to master comprehension. (Ella)

In the view of the teachers, deaf children need everything to be explained to them because they have a hard time grasping the meaning:

You simply have to explain to them every word, meaning of that word. (Ann)

Language and abstract thinking

Similar to deaf interviewees, the teachers also establish a link between language and the content taught. But contrary to the deaf interviewees' observations that place SZJ at the centre of their successful learning experience, for the teachers it is the deaf students' lack of fluency in a spoken language that hinders learning, especially of more abstract contents:

They are agrammatical. Everything that is abstract they do not understand easily, right away. For example, history is difficult for them. The subjects that are more obvious, concrete are easier for them. (Julie)

Signing as an auxiliary tool

Even though the teachers emphasize the importance of a spoken language for a proper linguistic and cognitive development, they readily address the value of signing. At face value, the teachers' attitudes towards signing are positive. However, signing is primarily viewed as an alternative form of communication that should assist students' comprehension only when necessary:

I think it [signing] should be used as it is somehow close to them. It's easier for them to understand if it's used. You can reach certain things through SL, which you can't achieve with speech only...I primarily use speech, only sometimes, if a child does not understand something, I use SL. I am a speech therapist, speech is a priority, only sometimes as a sort of assistance in explaining something, but rarely.
(Ella)

The first part of the excerpt above suggests an acknowledgement of the important role SL can have in conveying information to deaf students that cannot be fulfilled by spoken language. The second part of the excerpt suggests that speech therapy generally precludes the use of signing. Signing is used 'only sometimes as a sort of assistance [...] but rarely'. The two perspectives conveyed by the same teacher may be taken as an indication of a dissonance between intuitive ideational notions brought about by the actual experience of working with deaf students, and the exigencies of training, i.e. entailments of an aural-oral model within the medical-pathological perspective.

The teachers try to make the contents they teach clearer by using signs, but they see the difference between their own and their students' signing:

Well, it's not the same. It's practically their mother tongue. They sign faster... sometimes I ask for their help, to explain some things to me, but they can understand me quite well... I manage somehow...(Julie)

The perception of a linguistic hierarchy – that SL is a communication mode that is only a tool to assist communication is confirmed in the teachers' explicit assessment of SZJ's linguistic status. When asked whether they thought it is a language of the same complexity as Serbian in terms of grammatical and lexical categories, the teachers responded:

No, no, it's completely agrammatical. Sign language is agrammatical. (Ella)
Agrammatical. (Julie)
Agrammatical. (Ann)

The teachers thus reveal that attitudes towards SZJ that point at devaluing SL ideology have persisted in deaf education until now. In this sense, the Law on Sign Language has brought very little change to language practices in education. This was perhaps expected as the law only in principle calls educational institutions to promote SZJ for deaf students. The teachers did not even know about the existence of the law. The conclusion that is drawn is that much of the policy is purely hypothetical, which further proves that the prevalent ideology at its core has not changed.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to unravel, via a thematic qualitative approach, the perspectives of deaf people and hearing teachers on deaf education and SZJ use. Since this study took a qualitative approach, we have no intention of generalizing any of the findings. The method should offer explanatory insights into the prevailing perspectives on deaf education.

The results show that there is a growing awareness of the linguistic value of SZJ within SDC as it has begun to be viewed as a 'valid linguistic system' (Hill, 2015, p. 154) and not just signing Serbian words. Deaf interviewees' statements show that SZJ fluency on the part of the teachers is identified as a key predictor in deaf students' academic, linguistic and social-emotional achievement as it has been shown in studies of other SLs (Hoffmeister, 2000). The data further point at dissatisfaction about language deprivation, denied educational opportunities, and poor career choices that seem to be amplified by the growing awareness of the linguistic status of SZJ among deaf people. Some of the excerpts from deaf interviewees' testimonies also show a sense of acceptance with respect to the state-of-affairs in deaf education. This could be explained by the effect of paternalism and oralism that have imprinted on deaf students a view of deafness as something to be corrected. In a situation like this, oppression gets internalised and the dominant rhetoric becomes unquestionably accepted (Pease, 2002; Ladd, 2003).

The teachers, on the other hand, adopt the deficit-oriented perspective of the medical-pathological model within which the emphasis is put on students' inability to hear a spoken language, which has, as the teachers acknowledge, a detrimental impact on students' language and cognitive abilities. Once in the classroom the teachers soon discover that communicative access to curricular content presents a major obstacle as also observed in Nikolić (2009). The teachers further suggest that rehabilitative practice demonstrates that early identification of deafness, which often leads to cochlear implementation as a preferred form of intervention (Marshark et al., 2007), does not necessarily preclude the importance of signing. At times, as the teachers say, the use of signs makes the contents they teach more accessible to their students. However, signing is primarily seen as a helpful temporary tool which is 'practically' the deaf children's language, labelled as 'agrammatical'. This belief about 'agrammaticality' of SZJ may be seen as stemming from a 'devaluing ideology which places SLs low in an imagined hierarchy of languages or claims that SLs have no morphology or simply states that they have no value for children' (Krausneker, 2015, p. 416). Thus, the teachers in this study seem to view SZJ, as Hill (2015, p.146) observes, as a 'particular communication activity such as technical jargon or baby talk rather than a full-fledged linguistic system'. The fact that 'sign language' was officially recognized in Serbian Parliament does not seem to have changed these ideas. This case study shows that legislative action requires action on a societal level too for it to be successful. Governments need to be aware of that and must take the necessary steps to support the educators.

Dismantling of devaluing beliefs of special educators working with deaf students could be achieved through concrete institutional support in education as emphasized by O'Rourke et al. (2015) for minority languages and a different approach to language policy and planning which would re-evaluate pedagogical methodologies and practices. The re-evaluation would incorporate a cultural-linguistic minority perspective which, as emphasized by Higgins and Lieberman (2017), has been shown to have important implications for language development, teacher preparation and educational policy. If deaf people are to be given the opportunity to benefit from a cultural-linguistic minority perspective in their education, it is necessary for teachers to adopt this worldview.

In order to support teachers in reaching this goal, the organisation of a professional training of those teachers who work with deaf children could be a valid starting point. It could be that teachers, representatives of a larger society, need more training about cultural-linguistic issues, because, as Lane (2005) suggests, their prevailing aural-oral approach may be a result of their limited personal knowledge. However, it remains to be seen whether supplying teachers with this type of training would be sufficient. We have demonstrated that beliefs can have a strong influence, playing a mediated role between knowledge and teaching practices. Therefore, those beliefs should be addressed as well, and teachers should be made more aware of the positions within which they work. Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, teachers could be trained to be more aware of their deaf students' actual educational and language needs through which, as stated by H-Dirksen et al. (2014), deaf people 'may be

seen through a lens of human diversity and, therefore, worth valuing as they are, without recourse to “normalization”.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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