

The first reference for sign language grammar writing empowers signers all over the world

COST Action [SignGram](#) has produced the first guide for sign language grammars, marking a huge step towards equal rights for deaf signers worldwide.

SINGRAM

Researchers from 15 countries worldwide started from a crucial issue: the absence of comprehensive, state-of-the-art grammars takes its toll on sign language learning, training and interpreting. Most signers are born to hearing parents, who, in turn, ideally have to learn sign languages in order to communicate with their children.

Unlike spoken languages, sign languages can only be learnt through face-to-face interaction, given the generalised lack of learning material.

Acknowledging sign languages

Despite the importance of formal training, sign language grammars remain a widely unknown territory. Most sign languages are not even formally recognised as languages, although virtually every country in the world has a sign language of its own or even a variety of them.

Studies on sign language grammars have been scattered and only date back to the 1960s, which is why little is known about how such languages emerge and evolve.

The [network](#), led by Prof. Josep Quer (Universitat Pompeu Fabra) and Prof. Carlo Cecchetto (University of Milan-Bicocca/CNRS), includes researchers from 15 countries worldwide. They developed the SignGram Blueprint – **the first-ever tool to study sign language grammars as a whole**.

It takes the form of a **multimedia handbook** and works as a **standard for both linguists and non-specialists interested in writing up a grammar**.

The Blueprint includes a checklist of topics or building blocks that need to be addressed when writing up a grammar. Each building block comes with explanations, methodological tips and examples from sign languages, as well as bibliographical support. The handbook will be available free of charge by the end of the year.

The guide will also help linguists understand, monitor and document how sign languages evolve. *Differences in the way young and elderly signers use sign language can be staggering, which is also due to the absence of a standard way of teaching sign language grammars. This is why sign languages are endangered*, Prof. Cecchetto explained.

A network for a bigger purpose

The network will take the SignGram Blueprint one step further through their Horizon 2020-funded collaborative research project SIGN-HUB, which will see them develop actual grammars using innovative software developed from the handbook.

Studying sign languages is like entering a parallel universe. It's so gratifying because you can easily see the direct link between basic research and its results in real life. We have developed a real blueprint, which will contribute to a standard for teaching sign languages to signers and interpreters alike, or to sign language assessment in different domains, Prof. Quer commented.

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The Action was our starting point for something bigger – we wanted to actually produce grammars – Prof. Josep Quer

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The project will also be creating assessment tools to identify language difficulties in signers who have suffered brain damage, have developed dementia or were born with language impairments. The Horizon 2020 project also holds an educational and cultural purpose, as it plans to uncover new facets of historical events such as Shoah, World War II or the Spanish Civil War by looking into elderly signers' experiences.

Language normally evolves through sound, so we are somewhat biased to see language through that lens. We want to explore how these silent communities experienced such defining events in our history, Prof. Cecchetto added.

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