

“They have no language”: Exploring language ideologies in adult education for deaf migrants

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This article is based on data from an empirical research project on the multilingual situation of deaf migrants in Sweden. Deaf migrants attending folk high schools are a heterogeneous group with various language and educational backgrounds. Some of them have grown up with limited or no access to a spoken or signed language while others have grown up learning multiple languages. In those schools, the migrants learn Swedish Sign Language (STS) and Swedish as well as about Swedish society. The study uses an ethnographic approach, and data has been created through participant observations and interviews with teachers and migrants in three folk high schools in different municipalities in Sweden. The analysis reveals that language ideologies are present in these schools, such as what constitutes a language and what status different languages and other repertoires have. In addition, STS appears to be the only acceptable language for communication within the schools. Another finding is that the Eurocentric perspective on ‘language’ among researchers and teachers often collides with the migrants who have different experiences of language use. Furthermore, the study reveals that some migrants, after some time in school, begin to view their previous repertoires used for communication as inferior to STS. It also emerges that the teachers lack the knowledge necessary to understand what it means to learn a language formally for the first time as an adult. In order to develop teachers’ knowledge to ensure social justice, research on adult deaf migrants’ language acquisition within school contexts is essential.

Keywords: sign language, deaf education, language deprivation, deaf migrants, communicative repertoire, ethnography

1 Introduction

As a group, deaf migrants in Sweden are heterogenous in terms of their linguistic and educational backgrounds. Some deaf migrants have grown up with little or no access to a signed or spoken language, while others are fluent in several languages. Some have never attended school before coming to Sweden, while others have university degrees. However, as a group, deaf migrants are in general more vulnerable than hearing migrants because, in order to be able to state their reasons for moving to Sweden to the authorities, they must use a language that

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the authorities can understand with or without the help of an interpreter. While most hearing migrants can request a spoken language interpreter in their heritage language, such interpreters are not accessible for deaf migrants. Instead, sign language interpreters are needed. However, the national sign language in Sweden is Swedish Sign Language (henceforth STS). The majority of sign language interpreters master only STS, while deaf migrants, upon arrival, do not know STS. These types of situations are very complex, and deaf migrants are at risk of experiencing social injustice if they cannot inform the authorities about their backgrounds, needs, and reasons for getting a residence permit in Sweden.

As part of Sweden's integration plan, adult (hearing) migrants are given the opportunity to take Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), a language learning course intended to provide a basic knowledge of the Swedish language and Swedish society in order to be able to participate in everyday life (Skolverket, 2021). For deaf migrants, the necessity of learning STS is greater because it means that they can participate in meetings with the authorities or the workplace or can visit the doctor and access the same level of service that is provided for deaf Swedish citizens. Deaf adult migrants are provided opportunities to attend folk high schools catering to deaf and hard of hearing people. Folk high schools in Sweden offer non-formal adult education and the main objective for folk high schools is to provide education based on the student's needs, previous knowledge and experience. A unique feature of folk high schools is that the schools can design the contents of their own courses independently.¹

There are differences in the structures of the courses provided for hearing migrants and deaf migrants. Firstly, the current SFI curriculum is based mainly on the assumption that the students can hear and speak, and thus the teaching is largely built on spoken Swedish. Deaf migrants who cannot access spoken Swedish need to learn the language in its written form. This means that the teachers who are teaching deaf migrants must create their own curriculum to teach Swedish that is specifically targeted for deaf migrants. Secondly, there is no curriculum available for teachers to use as a guide in teaching STS targeted for deaf migrants. Thirdly, deaf migrants are required to learn two languages, Swedish and STS, simultaneously in order to be able to participate in society, while hearing migrants are only required to learn one language, Swedish. Despite this, they are often allocated the same amount of time as hearing migrants. Taken together, the language situation of deaf adult migrants is very complex, and it is important to expand knowledge about this group and the challenges they meet in order to ensure social justice. Unfortunately, research internationally on this group is sparse, even if it is a growing scientific interest (for a compilation, see Holmström & Sivunen, 2022; McAuliff, 2021). In Sweden, there were no scientific studies on the language situation for deaf migrants until recently when an empirical research project, *The Multilingual Situation of Deaf Refugees in Sweden* (Mulder), funded by the Swedish Research Council, was started in 2020 to generate knowledge on this group (Holmström et al., 2021). The study presented here is part of this larger project.

The focus of this article is on language ideologies in language education for deaf migrants provided by folk high schools (non-formal adult education) in Sweden and how these ideologies might influence the participants' language learning and their choice of language use. More specifically, we examine what kind of language ideologies are visible in the schools, how power relations come into play in language learning, and how the participants' repertoires are perceived.

In order to gain an understanding of deaf migrants' language learning, one must look at how the teachers and the migrants view languages and other repertoires and the consequences this might have on migrants' language learning.

2 Theoretical framing

2.1 Language ideologies

Kusters et al. (2020) describe language ideologies as “thoughts and beliefs about language, varieties, modalities, and the people who use them” (p. 5). The ways in which people talk about languages and how they define their linguistic repertoires reveal language ideologies. An example of a language ideological act is the naming of a sign language. The naming of a sign language is often done once the language has been recognised or documented by an official person or entity, for example, a researcher, a deaf association, or an NGO (Kusters et al., 2020). People often describe languages as if they are fixed rather than fluid. However, Shohamy (2006) argues that fixed boundaries imposed on languages, such as the practice of naming a language, are artificial. Language itself is fluid yet societal structures such as the education system create fixity in languages so that they can be counted, defined, and categorised. Pennycook and Otsuji (2016) point out that “language practices and identity are formed in a constant push and pull between fixity and fluidity” (p. 270).

The variations in language-related beliefs depend on the differences in life experience and how language awareness is shaped in various settings such as classrooms (McGroarty, 2010). McGroarty explains that language ideologies provide a sense of what is appropriate, and the more often an ideology appears in a setting the more likely it will become normalised. The dominant language ideology in Europe today is “standard languages”, which are labelled, countable, and differ from each other but are inter-translatable (Gal, 2006). Standardised languages are often seen as necessary and appropriate, and in a way, they are seen as “real languages” even though language is not static but is rather fluid and constantly changing (Reagan, 2010). The power of categorisation can be particularly felt among those who do not recognise themselves as legitimate users of a specific language (Busch, 2012).

A standardised national language and a homogenous majority culture are often considered the norms, while multilingualism and diversity are perceived as problematic (Bijvoet, 2020). This perspective has been dominating in Sweden for many years, and it has influenced the education system, language policies, regulations, and people's opinions. The idea of “in Sweden we speak Swedish” has led to educational investments that facilitate the learning of Swedish among immigrants. It also had led to the creation of a requirement to show language capabilities in order to gain employment. Furthermore, with monolingual norms there is the idea that languages should be separate from each other and not be mixed. This monolingual norm has influenced deaf education in Sweden, which, for over a century, has had the primary goal of teaching deaf children to speak Swedish regardless of their limited capabilities. Although the official language policy of Sweden today officially recognises several minority languages and provides information in various common migrant languages, the norm persists in numerous political decisions and regulations (Bijvoet, 2020).

2.2 *Power relations*

Language is social, and the use of language influences how we create and change our social structures and how we negotiate hierarchies, memberships, and status (Jørgensen, 2008). Language is connected with identity building, and using languages enables us to present who we are. Meanings are made through the use of dialogue, negotiations, arguments, and discussions, all of which we can use to show our thoughts and emotions (Wodak, 2011). Wodak raises the question of who determines which languages, linguistic behaviours, and identities are accepted. Languages are often hierarchically structured in such a way that some languages are viewed as “better” or “purer” than others. Piller (2016) explains that users of languages higher up in the hierarchy have more opportunities than users of languages lower in the hierarchy. Language choice, especially in group interactions, involves negotiations of social identities, which includes power struggles (Jørgensen, 2008).

Fejes (2019) points out that power relations are connected to subjectivity, such as determining who can speak, about what, and with what authority. Several European countries often stress the importance of language learning for migrants, arguing that access to the language of the majority is vital for migrants because it enables them to gain access to the wider society and to the labour market. Gaining knowledge about the Swedish language and how Swedish society works is seen as crucial in order to be included in society (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017). However, the idea that the migrants need to take responsibility for their own learning ignores other factors that may contribute to difficulties in learning the language of the majority. Language learning takes time and effort that not every individual has, and the degree of “fluency” is subjective in that it is viewed differently by everyone. Many other factors contribute to the ability to learn a new language, such as age, access to education, quality of teaching, and access to interactional opportunities (Piller, 2016).

In the case of deaf migrants who have grown up with limited or no access to a language during childhood, they may learn their first standardised language in adulthood when arriving in Sweden. There is evidence that it can be very difficult for deaf adults to learn a language later in life when they have not acquired a language in childhood (see, e.g., Glickman & Hall, 2019; Gulati, 2019). With delayed language learning, deaf individuals may acquire cognitive disabilities due to the lack of communication (Gulati, 2019). This is important for decision-makers to be aware of, especially if the government require these migrants to have sufficient language proficiency and education in order to obtain residence permits. These requirements place these migrants in a very subordinated and vulnerable situation because they may have very limited abilities to argue for their needs and their reasons to get a permit.

Janks (2010) explains that “recognising that a situation is less than ideal and naming what is wrong as a problem are the first step in transformative social action” (p. 42). Understanding the relationship between language and power, recognising one’s own language ideologies, and questioning the norms are keys to attaining social justice, especially in classrooms with diverse backgrounds.

2.3 *Sign languages and International Sign*

Sign languages are complex visual-gestural languages with grammatical structures that differ from spoken languages, which are aural-oral. Sign languages have

emerged in deaf communities around the world. One of the differences between signed and spoken languages, apart from their modalities, is that the majority of deaf children are born into hearing non-signing families. This means that they do not acquire sign language in the same manner as how hearing children born into hearing families acquire spoken languages (McBurney, 2012). The majority of deaf signing people often acquire sign languages either in deaf schools or in the deaf community they participate in.

When sign language people from different parts of the world, who do not share a common sign language (or homesign/gesture system), meet and interact, they negotiate meaning using gestures, pointing, and iconic and pantomimic structures commonly used in sign languages, as well as borrowed signs from different sign languages they know. This is labelled as “International Sign” (see, e.g., Hiddinga & Crasborn, 2011; Kusters, 2021). International Sign is currently not seen as an established language but is rather viewed or regarded as a language contact phenomenon. However, a growing body of lexical signs has been increasingly standardised and widespread, although the “standardised signs” differ depending on different contexts such as politics, academics, or sports (for a further description of International Sign, see Kusters, 2021).

2.4 Repertoires

The concept of “repertoire” is defined as a variety of strategies available at an individual’s disposal for interactional use (Pennycook, 2018). A person’s linguistic repertoire can consist of spoken languages, sign languages, written languages, gestures, body language, and visual depictions such as emoticons, photographs, videos, and drawings. A person’s communicative repertoire is broader and includes other interaction features beyond language, such as how one dresses, the way one behaves, and other social cues, for example, seating spots, talking tempo, and types of food and drinks (Rymes, 2014). A person’s repertoire is accumulated through meaningful exposure to what is around them (Spolsky, 2021). It can also be modified by moving to a new environment such as relocating to a new country. Using the communicative repertoire approach enables exploring the complexities of communication in the classroom and in everyday life (Rymes, 2010). The use of the entire repertoire as a mechanism to build a flexible communication is a part of translanguaging. Garcia and Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as new language practices that show the complexity of language exchanges among people with different backgrounds.

The concepts of linguistic and communicative repertoires are broad, but there is often a focus on “language” in spoken, signed, or written forms. Moriarty Harrelson (2019) notes that “deaf people’s repertoires and communicative practices challenge essentialism regarding modalities and understanding of ‘languages’” (p. 70). Moriarty Harrelson also raises the issue of how communicative practices that are not seen as part of a national language are often devalued. An example of a communicative practice that is often devalued is homesign. Lillo-Martin and Henner (2021) define homesign as a “communicative system generated by a deaf person without access to a signing community, for interacting with their family and community” (p. 407). Homesign includes gestures that are comparable to lexical signs such as pointing and gestures representing entities or actions. Although homesign is a communicative practice, it is not seen as a language. It is not a local, regional or national sign language and is often limited to one family.

When a deaf person uses a repertoire that does not fit into any of the named spoken or signed language categories, they are often labelled as having “no language” (Moriarty Harrelson, 2019).


Henner and Robinson (2021) coined the term ‘crip linguistics’ as a theoretical framework that can be used to recognise interdependency between language users in their desire to work toward mutual understanding. The authors argue that language plays a vital role in determining a person’s belonging in society as language is a site of great power and privilege. Crip linguistics recognise all types of languaging and resist the belief that there is one right way to language. It is important, when analysing languaging practices, not to separate the practices from the people that produce them. Spolsky (2021) points out that using the concept of repertoires, instead of named languages, enables analysis of languaging that may not fit within the boundaries of named languages.

3 Methodology

The data used for this article were generated as part of a four-year research project, *Mulder*, that aims to generate knowledge about deaf migrants’ language situation in Sweden (Holmström et al., 2021). The project team consists of three deaf researchers, two of whom are authors of this paper. For the purpose of this study, we have chosen data from the background interviews that were conducted with 24 deaf adult migrants who were attending one of the three folk high schools that have agreed to participate in our project. The background interviews gave us an insight into the participants’ upbringing as well as their language and educational backgrounds. In addition, we used data from interviews with 12 teachers (9 deaf, 3 hearing) in order to gain a picture of their educational background and their experiences teaching deaf migrants. We also selected some relevant clips from approximately 37 hours of classroom interaction videos that we recorded using an ethnographic method of participant observation.


3.1 Consent

Ethical approval was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority² for the project team to proceed with our research. Along with an introductory meeting with the teachers and the participants at each school, consent forms were distributed in four different formats: Swedish, English, easy-to-read Swedish, and simple sentences assisted with pictures for the participants to choose based on their preference.



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Information om Mulder projekt

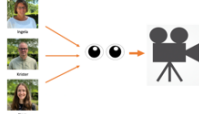
1. Jag förstår att intervjuerna, klassrumsobservation och tester kommer att filmas




2. Jag kan säga till forskaren att stoppa när som helst om jag inte vill bli filmad




3. Videomaterial kommer bara att ses av Ingela, Krister och Nora




4. Videomaterial kan användas för forskning men min identitet kommer inte att visas för allmänheten





Stockholms universitet


5. Jag har fått information skriftligt och på teckenspråk om forskningen



6. Jag accepterar att vara med i forskningen och att filmas



7. Jag får bestämma om jag inte vill vara med längre i forskningsprojektet



Namn:
Datum:
Underskrift:

Figure 1. Consent form with pictures.

Not every participant was able to understand what was written on the consent form, and because of this, we decided to ensure that the consent forms were provided in different formats to suit everyone, including the one illustrated in Figure 1, with pictures depicting what we were going to do in the research, for example, a picture of a video camera directed at another picture of people gathered in a classroom to show that we wanted to record classroom interactions using a video camera. We also gave the participants at least a few days to sign the consent forms before beginning our data collection, allowing them the time to clarify specific concerns they might have with teachers they trust.

The names of the participants and teachers have been kept anonymous to protect their identities, and for the purpose of this paper pseudonym names will be used. Because the deaf community in Sweden is small, data that can easily identify participants were not used. For instance, identifying the national sign language a participant uses can reveal the identity of the participant because there may be only a small number of people in Sweden who know a particular sign language, and even fewer who are attending one of the schools involved in our project. To protect their identity, we have chosen to use “[national] sign language” rather than reveal the name of the sign language.

3.2 Interviews

The interviews with the participants were recorded using a video camera in the schools, while the interviews with the teachers were conducted through the digital meeting platform Zoom and were recorded on the computer. The interviews at the school took place in a spare classroom that was offered to us by the teachers. The empirical data consisted of approximately 8 hours of video-

recorded interviews with 24 participants and 11 hours of interviews with 12 teachers. All of the interviews were conducted individually using STS. Three researchers, two of whom are co-authors of this article, conducted the interviews. Instead of stating who interviewed whom, each interviewer will be named I1 (interviewer 1), I2 (interviewer 2), and I3 (interviewer 3).

The questions for the interviews were semi-structured and covered a range of questions regarding their backgrounds such as their age, where they came from, when they came to Sweden, and whether they had attended school during childhood. In addition, there were questions asked about the participants' language(s), such as which language(s) they first learned, their language proficiency, how they communicate with their family, and their preferred language. The interviews with the teachers focused on their educational background, work experiences, and language proficiency. They also were asked which language(s) they use in their teaching, their experiences with teaching deaf migrants, and reflections on the deaf migrants' language development in STS and Swedish. Finally, they were asked what the difficulties were with teaching deaf migrants.

3.3 Participants

In this study, interviews were conducted with 24 participants (14 women, 10 men) ranging in age from 21 to 48 years old. Fifteen of the participants had at least 2 years of schooling, with an average of 10 years of schooling. The remaining 9 participants had never attended school before coming to Sweden. Interviews were also conducted with 12 teachers (7 women, 5 men), all of whom had upper secondary school degrees. However, their further education qualifications varied greatly. Some had university degrees while others had recreational leadership certificates from folk high schools. The teachers' educational backgrounds are compiled in Table 1 (with pseudonyms to secure their anonymity). Code names are used in this table instead of their pseudonym names that are used in the findings section. The purpose is to protect their identities as the number of teachers in our study is small which can make them identifiable by their qualifications.

Table 1. Teachers' educational backgrounds.

Teacher (code name)	Upper secondary school teacher degree	Primary school teacher degree	Folk high school teacher certificate	Folk high school pedagogy (short course)	Sign language teacher certificate	Recreational leadership certificate	Other education
L101				X		X	X
L102						X	X
L104				X	X		
L105					X		X
L103				X		X	X
L401							X
L402							
L201	X				X		X
L204	X						X
L205	X	X					
L206			X	X			X
L207				X			X

The column “Other education” covers other courses at different educational levels, including interpreting qualifications. Four of the teachers had a certificate in interpreting. All of the teachers had several years of experience with teaching in different contexts (ranging between 6 and 26 years). They were also fluent in STS and master Swedish at different levels. Most of them also knew some English. Four (all deaf) mentioned some International Sign skills and three knew a little American Sign Language. None of the teachers knew any of the migrants’ previous languages.

3.4 Data analysis

We analysed the video recordings from the interviews, and we identified themes that emerged from both the participants’ and teachers’ interviews. Video clips that were relevant for the themes were then translated into written English/Swedish. Translating the participants’ interviews was a challenging task because there were uses of International Sign, gestures, Swedish mouthing not attached to signs, and sporadic use of English mouthing attached to STS signs. Translating the teachers’ interviews was easier because they used STS only, which could then be translated into written Swedish first and then into written English. In the finding section, there are some examples where words that depict signs are shown in capitalised letters. The purpose of this is to focus on the choice of signs the person used. For the other examples we have used, quotations are taken from the translations we have done. The purpose of quotations is to focus on what was said.

4 Findings

The main aim of conducting interviews with the participants and the teachers was to gain an understanding of the participants’ linguistic backgrounds and the teachers’ teaching experiences and how these might influence the participants’ language learning. However, this proved to be more complex than initially anticipated. Firstly, different people have their own perceptions of what constitutes a language. Secondly, both the teachers and the participants used the statement “no language” as a label to describe some of the participants’ linguistic backgrounds. The participants also mentioned previous use of repertoires that might not fit within the boundaries of languages. This raises the question of whether the label of “having no language” should be applied to an individual who does not know a local, regional, or national signed or spoken language but who has their own communicative repertoires. They are able to communicate with other people in some form, so should they really be considered as “having no language”? Thirdly, power comes into play in how the teachers view the participants’ repertoires and how the participants view their own repertoires. The three areas listed above will be illuminated below.

4.1 What constitutes a language?

This section extracts four examples from the interviews that highlight the complexity of the concept of “language”. The first example showcasing the struggle in viewing a language as something fluid rather than bounded is from an

interview with Amir. Amir described his experiences at school as a young boy, learning basic signs such as DAD, MOM, and APARTMENT³. However, earlier on in the interview, Amir stated that he had never learned sign language growing up. When the interviewer (I1) asked Amir if the deaf school he attended used sign language, his reply was “A little. Hmm, small... Perfect? No.” Throughout the interview, Amir showed difficulties in labelling what communicative practices he used growing up. He mentioned toward the end of the interview that he used old [national] Sign Language in school and that he learned the new version of [national] Sign Language later in his adult life. Despite this statement, he repeatedly pointed out, throughout the interview, that he had never learned a sign language in the deaf school he attended. It seems, from the interview, that Amir had a view of what constitutes a language, and based on his perception he did not see the communicative practices he used during his school years as something that can be considered a “language”.

The second example is from an interview with Fatima, who described her experience growing up with “no language” because she had never attended school. When asked about how she communicated with her family, Fatima described how she mainly used gestures such as pointing at specific locations, e.g., THERE, PLATE, HERE. Later in the interview, Fatima mentioned that her hearing brother could sign because he was taught by a deaf person he knew at his workplace. Her brother taught her to sign, but she did not know the name of the sign language she learned. Even though Fatima mentioned that she signed with her brother growing up, she stated that she had “no language” before moving to Sweden. This raises the question of what are the criteria that must be fulfilled for Fatima to be able to consider what she used growing up as a language.

It is not only the deaf migrants themselves who have conflicting views on what should be considered as a language, and this issue also appeared in the teachers’ interviews. Even though all the teachers were fluent in STS, some did not name the language as STS. Instead, they primarily named it as “sign language”. For example, in an interview with Niklas, he stated:

I only know sign language. I’m very bad at writing Swedish. But I read on a good level.

Dennis also expressed a similar perception:

I’m focused on sign language, it’s the only one. I know it well. I have a deaf family, and therefore I am fully focused on sign language.

The two teachers seemed to be unaware that by using “sign language” rather than “Swedish Sign Language” they could be conceived of as dismissing the fact that there are national sign languages other than STS, and they do not recognise that it is important to differentiate between various sign languages, especially because they work with deaf migrants with varied language backgrounds.

When the teachers were asked whether they knew sign languages other than STS, four teachers mentioned some knowledge of American Sign Language, but the majority knew only STS. Four also mentioned that they knew International Sign. As mentioned above, the question of whether to consider International Sign as a language has been debated in deaf communities around the world (see, e.g., Kusters, 2021). This can be seen among the teachers because some teachers seemed unsure of what International Sign is. Several teachers argued that they do not use International Sign but rather “body language” and “adapted sign language” when

communicating with the participants. Kenneth signified the importance of body language:

It's a piece of STS plus more body language, these two things. Not International Sign, not fully STS, but a little STS and body language, gestures... Yes, mostly body language.

Niklas described how he communicated with the participants: "I'm trying to adapt myself and it's not purely international signing, not at all." He also tried to explain that he used "signing", omitting specific names. In the dialogue below, the interviewer (I3) asked Niklas which language he used in his teaching:

- N: [I] Preferably [use] Swedish. You have to sign, and if they don't understand, I can explain more. Because if I sign internationally, they never learn. They have to understand the signing, and if they don't, I have to explain more.
- I3: Does that mean you avoid International Sign?
- N: Yes
- I3: Do you use any of the participants' own languages as well, or just purely STS?
- N: Yes. Yes. Deaf. Sign language of the deaf.

As aforementioned, International Sign involves a lot of flexibility and adaptation. However, Kenneth and Niklas stated that they try to avoid International Sign and instead use body language and adapted sign language, which is in itself contradictory. Again, the teachers did not name the language they use to communicate with the participants. It is clear that what constitutes a language is interpreted differently among the participants and teachers, and each one has their own criteria for what qualifies as a "language".

4.2 Complexity of labelling

A question that was asked in the interviews with both the participants and the teachers was what languages they knew. This question came attached with the expectation from the interviewers that the answers would be clearly defined and could be counted. However, this was not the case. Three examples of the problematic issue of labelling languages and repertoires are laid out in this section.

The first example of the problematic issue of labelling is a dialogue between Celina and the interviewer (I1). One of the questions I1 asked was what the first language Celina learned was. Celina replied, saying that she did not have a language growing up and that she only used gestures to communicate with her parents. However, Celina had previously mentioned that she signed with her deaf brother using [national] Sign Language. I1 asked Celina if her deaf brother knew a sign language. She clarified that they signed but it was similar to gesturing and that it was "not really sign language". She then demonstrated examples of the gestures they used, pointing ME, YOU, OVER THERE. I1 asked her if what they used was a form of homesign. Celina agreed that they communicated using homesign.

The dialogue between Celina and I1 shows the complexity of labelling communicative repertoires. The back-and-forth process before agreeing on a term they felt was most appropriate can be seen as a lingual ideological negotiation where two people negotiate to find a term that best describes a specific communicative repertoire. Their views on languages, i.e. their language ideologies, emerged in this dialogue. Celina did not consider the communicative practices she used growing up as a "language". I1's language ideology is also visible in this

dialogue because there was an expectation that the answer should be clearly defined, that is, a label that could be categorised and counted. However, a clear definition was not given, and this led to a lingual ideology negotiation that ended in an agreement on homesign as the label that best described Celina's communicative practices growing up.

The teachers, in their interviews, often mentioned heterogeneity among the participants in terms of their backgrounds. In the schools, there were participants who had grown up with access to language(s) and education while others had not. Kenneth explained:

There is a big difference between those who have attended school and have deaf families. It is not a problem communicating with them, and they develop well, but those who have not attended school, have not been taught languages, have hearing families... They are a very vulnerable group, and they are the ones who have the most difficulties. They may have to start from the beginning even though they are over 30 years old. It's really tough.

The teachers regularly referred to the latter group as having “no language” or as individuals with language deprivation. An example of this description is from an interview with Dennis:

For example, STS... They have no language when they come here, but after a while they learn to sign and they can start to communicate.

Another example is from Niklas:

Those from [countries], most of them have language deprivation, they have never attended school.

The teachers' use of the labels “no language” and “language deprivation” to describe the group without considering their repertoires shows the teachers' lingual ideologies and their devaluation of communicative practices that do not fit national languages' boundaries.

Even though the teachers frequently stated in their interviews that they used STS to communicate with the participants in the classroom and during breaktime, the data from the participant observations revealed more flexibility in their communications. This finding shows the importance of observations because it enabled us to identify the wide range of repertoires used in the classrooms that were not mentioned in the interviews. The teachers used a range of resources to achieve mutual understandings of different topics in their teachings. They not only used STS, but also gestures, pointing, pictures (primarily using Google searches), drawings, and enactments. Sometimes, they also used real objects to show what they meant. Interestingly, the occurrences of Swedish words were more common than they reported in the interviews. We found that written words and texts appeared in almost all of their teachings, even if the focus was not always on Swedish *per se*. For example, when Kenneth and Niklas taught the STS signs for feelings, they showed pictures through a projector. On the slides, the Swedish words appeared in connection to the pictures (see Figure 2). After the participants had guessed which STS sign represented the picture shown, they wrote down the Swedish word in their notebooks, sometimes attached with small drawings in order to remember what the word meant. In a similar way, Angela asked the participants for types of furniture that can typically be found in a living

room. The participants suggested different STS signs and Angela wrote them in Swedish on the whiteboard. After a while, Angela went back to the first written word and asked the participants for the sign equivalent for the Swedish word. It appears that STS and Swedish learning seem to go hand in hand in most teaching contexts at the schools.



Figure 2. Teaching of STS signs with constant appearance of Swedish words.

Another issue that appeared in the teachers' interviews was how some teachers considered the STS that they used with the participants as not always being "real STS". Kenneth described it as a reduced, lower-level language:

Of course, I don't sign fully with them, no. No one would understand anything then. I often adapt what I sign, lowering the level. For example, I have two groups where one is on a lower level and the other higher. I sign more with the higher ones, but I use more pictures, on the SmartBoard, with the lower one. I show them pictures, and we pause a lot and watch again. That group needs more language. I do not use full sign language with them, but reduced language.

Kenneth explained that the lower-level group "needs more language" without showing consideration for the repertoires the individuals in that group may have that could be used to the class's advantage even though he mentioned the use of pictures, SmartBoards, and videos, all of which are part of translanguaging. The teachers seemed to have an ambiguous way of looking at their teaching, and they seemed fixated on the idea that the participants should learn and use STS only and that they themselves should use STS in their teachings. However, the participant observation data showed how they used all strategies available to achieve a common understanding.

4.3 Status of languages and other repertoires

Every language comes attached with a status, based on each individual's own language ideology. In this section, four examples that show how languages and other repertoires are viewed as well as how STS is prioritised above other languages and repertoires are illustrated.

For some participants, learning STS shifted their views toward the communicative repertoires they previously used. An example of this view shift is from an interview with Fatima, who explained how she used gestures as the main form of communication with her parents before they moved to Sweden. After some years living in Sweden and learning STS, Fatima explained how she preferred to use STS with her parents:

I must sign. Using gestures is like being a child [just] pointing. Better, as an adult, to sign. So they sign a little sometimes.

Communicating with her parents using STS rather than using gestures was important to Fatima, and she tried to convey this to her mother:

I asked mom to use language. Mom said no... Mom doesn't understand. I try to teach her language bit by bit.

For Fatima, using STS enables her to be seen as an adult by her parents. In addition, she mentioned that the use of gestures should be avoided as it was seen as inferior. Learning STS is empowering for Fatima because it gives her the opportunity to be independent and to be treated as an equal by her family members.

A recurring issue that appeared in the participants' interviews was the view that using STS at home was seen as something they should do. In two cases, language use at home was dictated by the husband. Valerie, who used [national] Sign Language every day before moving to Sweden, explained that her husband told her not to use [national] Sign Language at home and that it was important for her to use STS. Another participant, Nadia, was told by her husband not to use [national] Sign Language in their home. She explained that her husband believed that by using STS and Swedish every day at home, she would be able to improve her capabilities in the two languages quicker and that using [national] Sign Language would slow her down. This is in line with the general assumptions in Sweden that learning Swedish, and in this case STS as well, enables migrants to integrate into society better and gives them opportunities such as employment. The issue of language hierarchy is shown in these two examples where STS is viewed as "better" and other languages are seen as "forbidden".

In the interviews, all of the teachers stated that they use STS and written Swedish (e.g., on the whiteboard or in books and notebooks) in their teachings and not any other languages. The reasons for this choice, according to the teachers, are because the participants are there with the intention of learning STS and because STS is the common language that can include all participants. As Anita put it:

Sometimes, the participants have mixed language uses, but we try to encourage them to use STS. But I know that in the evenings at the dormitory, there are occurrences where those who know another country's sign language use it among themselves, and others have experienced that they are left out. Therefore, we try to inform them that they should always use STS.

The teachers often encourage the use of STS both inside and outside the classroom. They have pointed out that the aim for the participants is to develop their STS as much as possible. However, they are aware that there are some participants who find it easier and more relaxing to use the national sign language they may have in common with other participants. It is interesting that despite the general association of the dormitory as a place where students relax after school finishes, the teachers remind them that they should always use STS in the dormitory. It seems almost like the language practices in school are viewed as correct whereas the language practices, especially mixed language uses, at home are discouraged. In her interview, Fanny mentioned that there are some cases where the teachers have to remind the participants that they should use STS:

Sometimes we have to act like language guards and check [that they use STS]. There are cases where two people from the same country, who have grown up with languages, cling onto each other, but my perception is that most people really struggle and want to learn STS. They are fighting hard. But of course, under the table, they certainly use their own language, which we miss.

The expression “under the table” is an interesting choice for the teacher to use because it signifies an action that is seen as forbidden or illegal. This choice of words may show the teachers’ beliefs that language practices that are not STS are seen as deviant. Both the teachers and the participants have certain views on how language and other repertoires should or should not be used. They also value the languages differently.

From the findings under the three sections above, it can be seen that different language ideologies are present in language learning classrooms where deaf migrants participate. It is essential that teachers become more conscious about the presence of language ideologies. The teachers also need to reflect on how language ideologies might impact deaf migrants’ language learning and how these might lead to feelings of shame and poor self-esteem. By reflecting on their own actions and by understanding the reasonings behind the actions of the deaf migrants, the teachers may attain social justice for deaf migrants both inside and outside educational contexts.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The findings show that both the participants and the teachers have certain perceptions of what constitutes a language and whether certain repertoires qualify as “language”. Repertoires that lie outside the boundaries of languages, such as homesign and gestures, are often not considered. This has resulted in individuals who have used homesign and/or gestures as the main form of communication being deemed as having “no language”.

It is important to note that, as researchers, we also have our own perceptions on what we consider “language”. It seems that, in the interviews, our Eurocentric perspectives have collided with most of the participants’ experiences with language use. Their repertoires consist not only of languages, but also gestures, homesign, and other visual forms of communication that are not easily defined. Even though the interviews were semi-structured to enable open dialogues, we expected to receive clearly defined answers that could then be easily categorised and counted. Language is fluid and constantly evolving (Shohamy, 2006), yet we

felt the need to name languages and label repertoires. As researchers, we must constantly reflect on our own behaviours in order to understand how our positionality and ideologies may affect our research. The teachers also may need to have ongoing self-reflections because the effect of the narrow and limited perspective is a missed opportunity for the teachers to see how each person's repertoire can be used to enrich the classroom's language learning experience. Janks (2010) mentions that education needs to enable students to understand why language diversity is a resource for creativity and that all languages spoken in the classroom should be valued. This can also be applied to the language learning classes the deaf migrants are taking by changing the teachers' and participants' views of repertoires that do not fit within the boundaries of languages as opportunities rather than inhibitions. Embracing diversity in languages and other repertoires that deaf migrants bring to the classroom creates a safe space where the participants can thrive, which is necessary for social justice in language education.

In Sivunen's research (2019) on deaf asylum seekers in reception centres in Finland, she explains how limited language proficiency among deaf asylum seekers can increase the risk of misunderstanding and the inability to express things that are necessary for the authorities and decision-makers to know. Some of the participants in our study, who were seeking residence permits, seemed to understand the consequences of not learning STS, which may have increased the pressure in their language learning. It may also have had an influence on their choice of language use outside the school environment. Avoiding their previous language(s) and/or other repertoires may be an act to avoid negative reactions, such as discipline from their teachers or complaints from their peers. It can also be a way for them to signify to Swedish society that they have a right to be in this country because they are making the effort to integrate even if it means an erasure of a part of their identity. For other deaf migrants, learning STS is a way to grow a sense of empowerment and independence, whereas their previous repertoires meant that they were limited to communication only with their family members.

We also found that some deaf migrants who had limited or no access to language and education during their childhood were stagnating on a low level in STS skills. They were only able to communicate about things primarily related to their own experiences, and they did not acquire written Swedish on a level that they were able to read work instructions, newspapers, or other messages common in everyday life in Sweden. Cases such as these are important to examine further because the teachers who meet these deaf migrants need greater understanding of what it means to learn a first language in adulthood, and they need to be more aware of the risk that some deaf migrants have acquired cognitive disabilities due to the lack of communication (Gulati, 2019).

Linguistic privilege among the teachers has meant that they are not aware of the effects of their own actions, such as the creation of a space where there is no other choice but to use the dominant language, which, in this case, is STS. Piller (2016) notes the importance of being aware of one's own linguistic privileges because such an awareness can promote empathy, leading to being an effective ally. The teachers' use of phrases such as "language guards" can be seen as a form of language policing. Language policing in numerous schools for the deaf across several countries over decades were usually in the form of oralism while sign languages were prohibited (see Svartholm, 1984 for details on the history of oralism in deaf schools). Deaf pupils in these schools used a sign language as a

form of resistance. For instance, in O'Connell and Deegan (2014), deaf pupil signed in secret "behind the teacher's back" as a defiance against the school's language policy. In our study, language policing is present through the enforcement of STS while the use of other sign languages is discouraged. However, deaf migrants' act of signing "under the table" can be seen as a form of resistance.

As mentioned above, for the majority of deaf migrants learning new languages can be empowering because it enables them to be independent in a new society. Lainio (2004) explains that if people acknowledge the existence of an individual's language(s), the individual's positive self-image can develop because language is closely connected to the individual's identity. In order to have safe spaces for learners to thrive in and not feel ashamed of their backgrounds, opportunities to embrace every individual's linguistic and cultural backgrounds are necessary.

Endnotes

¹ For a further description of folk high schools, see https://www.folkhogskola.nu/globalassets/dokument-och-filer/folkhogskola_eng_engelska.pdf

² DNR 2020-02865

³ When signs are represented in written form, capital letters are conventionally used.

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