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SIGN LANGUAGE LINGUISTICS SOCIETY
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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

It is with great concern that we learned about the intention of some of the Members of the Italian Parliament to change the name of the sign language used by the Deaf community in Italy, known to all —users and linguists— for many years as *Lingua dei Segni Italiana* (LIS) and to introduce the term *linguaggio mimico-gestuale* (LMG) in the bill that intends to recognize it and to ensure some basic guarantees for its use.

As the Board of the *Sign Language Linguistics Society* (which represents the international academic and professional association of linguists that work on sign languages around the world), we would like to draw your attention to the fact that such an intended change in terminology is not only unmotivated, but it can also have quite the opposite effect of what the bill tries to achieve. For a few decades now, it has been scientifically demonstrated that the sign languages that have spontaneously arisen within Deaf communities possess all the defining features that are known to characterize any natural human language and that, although these languages are produced and perceived in a different modality, they are as complex and complete as any spoken language. This has been attested for numerous sign languages at all levels of their grammatical structure, as well as in their sociolinguistic patterns and in the core biological structures that underlie the language faculty in production, comprehension, acquisition and impairment. The main differences between spoken and signed languages reflect the fact that well-established spoken languages have a standard form and a written tradition, whereas sign languages have been traditionally marginalized as a result of the stigma associated with deafness, on the one hand, and with minority languages that have been kept outside most spheres of public life in mainstream society, on the other.

Over the past few decades, however, many legislative initiatives have been taken within the European Union and worldwide to address this situation of inequality by recognizing sign languages and the rights of their users. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the term *sign language* has been used together with a national adjective (see for instance the recent publication *Sign Language Legislation in the European Union*, eds. M. Wheatley, M. & A. Pabsch. 2010. Brussels: European Union of the Deaf. http://www.eud.eu/EUD_Book-i-293.html). With this choice, it is made clear that sign languages are not composed of either *mime* or *gesture*, which are strictly speaking non-linguistic, but rather of *signs*, which is the well-established scientific term used in linguistics to refer to the equivalent of a word in visual-gestural languages: signs are made up of non-meaningful elements that combine to give stable meaning to morphological and lexical units; when combined grammatically, they give rise to complex syntactic structures, which in turn combine in discourse. Few of these grammatical properties can be applied to mime or gesture, even if they co-occur in face-to-face

communication with spoken and signed languages. Stating that the language of the Deaf community in Italy is made of mime and gesture would depict it as a degraded or incomplete form of communication deprived of the characteristic properties of a natural language. However, this is a paradox, as the bill intends to correct not only the current situation of inequality but also the misconceptions held by the majority of the population. Moreover, in languages like Italian that make the explicit distinction between *lingua* and *linguaggio*, only the former term is used to refer to natural human languages, as the latter is used more broadly and it can refer to artificial, invented communication systems that are not the natural language of any community which is spontaneously learned by infants and transmitted from generation to generation.

It is important to remember that *Lingua dei Segni Italiana* is the term widely accepted by their users of this language nationwide and thus this terminology should be respected. We would also like to point out that LIS has been referred to using this name in the linguistic research scene since the early days of sign language research in Europe in the 1980s and that a significant number of renowned senior and junior researchers of LIS have gained national and international recognition since then, as their presence in international scientific publications and meetings testify.

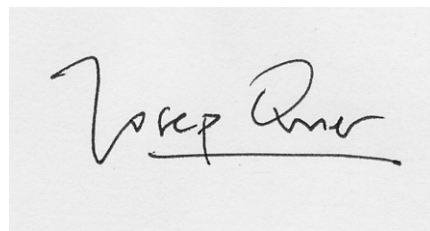
By highlighting the evidence and the arguments mentioned above, we strongly support the recognition of LIS but at the same time kindly ask you to reconsider the unjustified change of name that has been put forth for *Lingua dei Segni Italiana* (LIS), as this would arguably represent many steps back in the path of recognition and respect that the bill aims at guaranteeing.

Yours sincerely,



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On behalf of the board of the *Sign Language Linguistics Society*