

## **A commentary on the recent controversy to recognize *Lingua dei Segni Italiana***

There is a silent battle going on as I write this letter; a battle over a peoples' voice, their right to be heard, and the ownership of their language, which may soon be wrested away from them.

Most of the world does not think about sign language as a method of regular communication, much less place it on par with spoken and written language. But as research has shown time and time again for over 50 years, sign language is indeed a language with it's own rules, grammar, and syntax- whether it be American Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language, or Italian Sign Language.

The Italian Deaf community has labored for years to convince the government to recognize Italian Sign Language (*Lingua dei Segni Italiana*, or LIS) as an official language. They were able to successfully bring a bill to the Italian Senate, but their moment of near-triumph was also where things took a heartbreaking turn. The bill was approved, with LIS retitled as "Language of Mime and Gestures," or LMG.

To demote LIS and label it a farcical method of communication is ignorance, at best. At worst, it is modern-day colonialism; an attempt of the majority to subjugate a minority. Hearing doctors, speech therapists, and teachers have been telling Deaf people for years that we must learn to speak- we must integrate with the majority. And yet, time and time again- we have stated that we are proud to be who we are, a people of the eye. For decades, our voice has been drowned out by the of the majority, and those who think they know better.

As a recent commentator on the LIS/LMG debate stated, if the government going to rename Italian Sign Language to "Language of Mime and Gesture," they might as well rename spoken Italian to "Language of Moans and Grunts." Language, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. And as any anthropologist will tell you, language and culture are inseparably entwined. A language disappears off the face of the earth every 2 weeks, and along with it, a culture, its customs, and traditions disappear as well. If we start ushering languages to the chopping block, we are amputating pieces of our own humanity.

In all of my travels, one thing has reverberated: you can't stop Deaf people from using sign language. I've seen classrooms full of Deaf children in India who are forced to use only their voices- and yet, as soon as they walk out the door, their delight at using their native sign language is profound. I've met Deaf people in Cambodia who were abandoned by their parents, and had no language and no hope- until they were found by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that taught them sign language, and then they blossomed. When I taught in China for 10 months, my Deaf students were thrilled to have a Deaf teacher, because even though we were signing in different languages, we could connect more than they ever could with hearing teachers.

Every signer knows this: even though sign languages are different from country to country, and sometimes region to region- when you meet another Deaf person, often the first question signed is: "Are you deaf? Me too!"

The strongest weapon in life a person has to wield is his/her voice, whether that voice is expressed through spoken, written, or signed language. The cry of the Deaf community in Italy has been heard- there have been protests from Tokyo to Berlin, from San Francisco to London. But they must also be heard at home in Rome, - at the hands of the government who will decide their linguistic and cultural fate.

As Victor Hugo famously said: "What matters deafness of the ears when the mind hears? The one true deafness, the incurable deafness, is that of the mind." The Italian Deaf community and the global signing community has voiced it's concerns, it's plea that we not be diminished, trivialized, and eventually forgotten. I can only hope we will be heard.

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Discovering Deaf Worlds

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