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Grammar and Experience: The Interplay Between Language Awareness and Attitude in Italian Sign Language (LIS)

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Abstract

Shifts in the awareness towards language may lead to new language attitude and to a selection process of certain features among the many forms sign language can have in a community and ultimately to language change. Drawing from usage-based views (Bybee, 2006; Hopper, 1987), from studies on perception and attitudes (McKenzie 2015; Dragojevic et al., 2021) and from ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974), this paper will investigate with the matched guise and participant observation techniques how specific linguistic features are guided by the participants' language awareness and attitudes. Ten deaf participants (age range 28-82) were shown four videos with signers using different formal registers of LIS and were asked questions about their signing style in a natural setting. Levels of language awareness were analyzed in the light of Culioli (1990) in accordance with a sign language awareness scale and correlated with language attitudes. Results show that language attitude is shaped by language ideologies and awareness which leads to a selection of communicative patterns made legitimate by the community in the direction of autonomy, purism and identity preservation.

Keywords: Language attitude, Italian sign language, Linguistic awareness, Ethnography of communication, Matched guise, Participant observation technique

1. Introduction

In the last decades, functionalist and cognitive approaches (Hopper 1987, Bybee 2006; Langacker, 1991) have proposed a research paradigm that considers grammar as the cognitive organization of one's experience with language. In other words, any language description

should consider socio-cultural rules, norms and values. From structural to generativist approaches, language has been described as a stable, invariable system based on categories with clear boundaries as it is represented by the writing systems. This choice, often implicit, has led to distinguish language from communication and to overlook some crucial phenomena in face to face communication. Conversely, to explore a language means to understand how it functions in a communicative event, taking into account what is generally considered paralinguistic or external to language and finally investigate how this shapes grammar. Humans communicate in a great variety of ways depending on the languages in their repertoire, their communicative needs, the semiotic resources in the context: for example, hearing people can integrate their speech with pointing and representative gestures that look very similar to signs (see for example, the Italian gesture for coffee 'caffè') (Note 1) and deaf people can use mouth actions as complements to the signed utterance (Boyes Braem and Sutton Spence, 2001; Fontana, 2008) (Note 2).

Another consequence of traditional theories of language is that variability has been completely overlooked. Dominant theoretical models have been based on a separation of linguistic and social factors. Traditionally, variation in languages concerns a socio-functional dimension and consists of a systematic modification in relation to diverse variables. In LIS variation has been correlated to geographic location (*diatopy*), to communicative situations (*diaphasia*), as well as to the presence of other languages in the repertoire together with their social status (*contact languages*) (Volterra et al., 2022). The phenomenon of variation naturally occurs as a process that may be better described by a continuum rather than by categories. Diatopic and diaphasic variation influence body components (facial expression, eye gaze etc.) and lexical units. Diastratic variation correlated to social stratus and other social variables like generation or gender has been discussed in Volterra et al. (2022) but still need further analysis. Hence, so far, when linguistic analysis has focused on language structure, it has excluded social factors and has worked on artificial homogeneity (Martinet, 1974). However, language does not work in an artificial vacuum and any linguistic feature is the result of the interplay of social, sociolinguistic and linguistic factors. This means that social variables are part of language and cannot be considered as external to language.

Linguistic ethnography and ethnography of communication have focussed on the construction of meaning in everyday communication, in narratives, in real-life communicative situations (Hymes, 1974; Duranti, 2007; Kusters and Hou, 2020; Hodge and Goico, 2022). These perspectives have highlighted the importance of the relationship between the researcher and the community under analysis through approaches based on the participant observation technique.

Under these perspectives, language attitudes should be taken into consideration not only because they shape the community but also because they shape the language and prove how much language and community are intertwined. Language attitudes are based on ideologies, beliefs and opinion on the language(s) of a repertoire and on people who use them. This research, that has been primarily descriptive, has shown that languages have a social meaning (McKenzie, 2015). Attitudes toward a wide range of linguistic variation have been documented (see Dragojevic et al, 2021 for a review): regional (e.g., Kinzler & DeJesus,

2013), ethnic (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2004), foreign accents (e.g., Lindemann, 2003); code-switching (e.g., Genesee & Bourhis, 1982); social-class accents and dialects (e.g., Giles, 1970); gay and lesbian speech (e.g., Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020); powerful/powerless language (e.g., Gibbons et al., 1991). According to Baker (1992, p.29), language attitude is more an umbrella term that includes a variety of specific attitudes ranging from a general attitude to language, to language learning, to minority language(s), to language acquisition. Dragojevic et al. (2021), however, maintain that language attitudes do not occur in a random way and rather seem to be correlated to the status of a given variety within a community. Most importantly, Labov (1972) and also Hymes (1974) highlight that communities are based on norms related to language attitudes and linguistic ideologies. Attitudes can influence the language policy, naturalize the boundaries of communities, justify exclusion or inclusion processes, enact social identities. This is particularly true for sign languages where language attitudes have been investigated in various languages and from different perspectives (Krausneker, 2015; Bayley et al., 2017; Kusters et al., 2020; Bilgiç et al., 2021; Kusters and Lucas, 2022).

The present study intends to draw from usage-based, ethnographic and language attitudes approaches and methodologies to explore the interplay between language awareness and attitude in shaping language variation and grammar.

The changing language attitude and awareness of LIS offers a unique perspective to explore the perception of language variation in LIS. This shift shows that grammar is constantly changing because language awareness can influence more general cognitive abilities such as to create mental representation, to categorize, to generalize, to form inferences and ultimately shape language attitude (Pinto and El Euch, 2015).

2. Sign Language Attitude and Ideologies

Studies on language attitudes (Krausneker, 2015; Bayley et al., 2017; Kusters et al., 2020; Bilgiçet al., 2021; Kusters and Lucas, 2022) have mainly focused on the opposition between a sociocultural and a medical view of deafness that is still very much alive in Italy. These studies have shown how prejudices on the visuo-gestural nature of sign languages dating back to the Milan Congress have influenced education and have impacted sign language usage and language attitude. Krausneker (2015, p.415) has offered a "subjective, yet informed, approximative grid of ideologically driven attitudes toward sign languages, that are specifically relevant to sign language policy making." Bayley et al. (2017) have analyzed the attitudes towards Black ASL (BASL) and have shown how adult ASL signers still perceive white signing as superior. Kusters et al. (2020) have explored the concept of sign language attitudes and ideologies and have dealt with both epistemological and specific issues related to sign language, like standardization and purism or naming and identifying sign languages as true languages. Bilgiç et al., (2021) have developed a tool for measuring attitudes towards Turkish Sign Language in students in the Special Education Departments. So far there is no research on perception and language attitude towards the different varieties of LIS. Few research has been conducted on linguistic and metalinguistic awareness of LIS (Fontana et al., 2015; Rinaldi and Pinto, 2016; Fontana, 2016; Volterra and Fontana, 2020; Volterra et al.,

2022) however, without investigating the correlation between language awareness and attitude.

The present paper focuses on the shift in language attitude and perception of Italian Sign Language (LIS) as a result of language awareness. In particular, the aim of this study is to show that language attitudes and ideology are correlated to linguistic awareness through a scale of linguistic awareness (Fontana, 2016). In accordance with the present approach, this hypothesis will be explored with the matched guise and the participant observation technique in an ethnographic framework (Hymes, 1974). It is important, before going further, to introduce the author of the present research. She is a hearing CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) who has acquired sign language from her deaf parents and who has worked with Deaf people since she was very young. Her perspective as a CODA signer, member of the local Deaf Community and as a researcher has provided her with the valuable opportunity of experiencing both the etic and the emic level of linguistic analysis and to research by distinguishing between *academic language ideologies* and *everyday language ideologies* (Kusters and Sahasrabudhe, 2018). The combination of these two perspectives is crucial for understanding language attitude since sometimes the emic perspective can disclose aspects that can be crucial for understanding language and community and can lead to re-think etic knowledge (Pike, 1967; Hymes, 1974).

Analyzing language attitudes and awareness means exploring context, one or more interlocutors, their language attitudes, a certain communicative intention, as well knowledge that is held in common. It means first to be immersed in a community, and at the same time being able to distance oneself and observe values and assumptions of the culture. Second, it means to develop instruments and methodologies that allow the measurement of language awareness and its impact and correlation with attitude. In this study, on one side, the matched guise technique (MGT) (Lambert et al., 1960) will be adapted as indirect measurement of implicit and explicit attitudes of LIS signers towards different varieties of the LIS formal register. On the other, a scale for measuring language awareness in sign language (SLAS) will be used following the epistemological suggestions of Fontana (2016). Finally, drawing on these approaches and using these methodologies, this paper will try to further research by identifying a correlation between language awareness, language attitude and variation in the nature of the LIS formal register. Although the present study focuses on language attitude and awareness in LIS, also spoken Italian is considered because, in the author's opinion, language attitude develops in relation to the languages of a repertoire that are in constant contact.

For this reason, in order to understand the nature of the phenomena under analysis, this paper needs to primarily introduce the community, its bilingual repertoire and describe the development of linguistic awareness within the Italian signing community.

3. The Linguistic Repertoire of Italian Deaf Community: Insights on Variation and Trasmission

Linguistic repertoire, status of the languages in the repertoire, attitudes and perception towards the two languages together with sign language transmission are some of the key factors to explore the many forms any language can have within a certain community (Fontana et al., 2015). To belong to the Deaf community means then not only to share rules for the conduct and interpretation of the language in the repertories in communicative situations or events (Hymes,

1972). It also involves one's own linguistic repertoire, attitude and perception towards the two languages and finally one's own way of experiencing deafness. Starting from the linguistic repertoire, generally deaf people are bilingual because their repertoire include their sign language and spoken Italian. Consequently, the dimensions of variation for LIS are very complex and are inevitably tied to the presence of the three modalities of communication (signed, spoken and written) in the linguistic repertoire of the community. For this reason, Deaf people's bilingualism is bimodal because the two languages exploit different modalities, and are acquired through different paths (Pinto & Volterra, 2008).

LIS is a visual-gestural language that has not developed a written form. Sign Language is always face-to-face, uses space and components of the body, and in terms of its utterances, is *multimodal* and *multilinear* (i.e. it includes simultaneously produced components). Indeed, it is possible to use two hands and the body parameters to simultaneously convey different but correlated information. From the sub-lexical to the utterance level, sign language is organized on the basis of semiotic, cognitive and semantic-pragmatic constraints which strongly involve the body. The process of conceptualization and meaning construction that occurs in sign languages has been described in terms of "iconisation de l'experience" (Cuxac, 2000). Constraints in sign languages are based on a communicative ecology (Hymes, 1974) which includes the body, the environment and socio-cultural shared practices (Volterra et al., 2022).

Spoken language is learnt through speech therapy generally starting from early infancy. The learning of spoken language does not follow the same developmental stage as hearing children but requires many years of speech therapy in an artificial setting (Caselli *et al*. 2006). Consequently, at the age of five, deaf children, who follow a monolingual oral education, do not generally develop language skills comparable to their hearing peers. Studies (Caselli et al., 2006; Fontana, 2015) that have analyzed the written and oral productions in Italian have revealed, in spite of considerable variability, a number of recurring characteristics at the morphological, morphosyntactic, lexical and semantic-pragmatic level. For this reason, it is not possible to consider vocal languages as L2 and the categories 'first language', 'second language', and 'mother tongue' will not be used in the present study as they do not exactly mirror the specificities of deaf bilingualism.

Sign language is acquired through exposure during infancy, more frequently at a young age or even later. The two languages are used alternatively but are in systematic contact, so they influence each other, occurring often simultaneously because there are no serial order constraints (Capek *et al*. 2008). In other words, bimodal bilingualism plays an important role in the organization of information at both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels as it allows for the simultaneous expression of related content.

Furthermore, the two languages have an unequal status: spoken language is widely shared, is institutional and used in education, in the media communication, and in many other formal contexts. Sign language has been long stigmatized and only recently is being used in formal contexts, but still not enough in education. Sign language transmission is affected also by sociolinguistic variables. It is a minority and long stigmatized language that does not play any institutional role within the Deaf community and the hearing majority. This results in limitations in language learning and exposure environment. As a matter of fact, few schools

use Sign language in the classroom (in Biella and Rome where sign language is studied like any other subject and taught to all students (Volterra et al., 2022) and often teachers who use Sign language are not fluent themselves in the language. There are very few opportunities to interact with Deaf or hearing peers who are fluent in Sign language. Consequently, the two languages are not perceived in the same way. Sign language transmission is strongly influenced by the social construction of deafness, by parents' representation of deafness, the kind of education, and the relationship with the hearing community in terms of language and identity. Therefore, the Deaf community has always to negotiate its position of linguistic minority with the hearing majority that sees it under a pathological perspective.

In the Western communities, only about 10% of the deaf population is born deaf to deaf parents. The remaining 90% have hearing parents who do not know any sign languages. Hence, the transmission of Sign language tends to occur in a horizontal (among peers) rather than vertical way (from generation to generation). Furthermore, technology, the increasing of mainstreaming in Deaf education and the decreasing importance of Deaf Clubs are affecting patterns of language transmission (Schembri *et al*., 2018) since they have further influenced the educational path of deaf children and have led to delay or deny the access to Sign language.

The above mentioned variables together with the increasing number of Sign language second language learners (both hearing and deaf) cause a high linguistic diversity within the signing community and produce an impact on the standardization process and the development of a norm. Individual differences are the result of various factors such as: the family background (whether deaf or hearing; signer or non signer; low/high level of education); age and amount of systematic exposure to Sign language; hearing impairment, type of acoustic device (whether Hearing aids or Cochlear Implants), the speech therapy path, the educational context and approach (if mainstreamed or not, if bilingual or monolingual).

Since community is heterogeneous by definition, the condition of 'native' cannot be viewed as a criteria of homogeneity (Cuxac & Antinoro Pizzuto, 2010). The Deaf community is mainly composed of deaf persons born to hearing families that have acquired/learnt sign language in different moment of their lives. However, early exposure to sign language does not necessarily lead to sign language skills and awareness. In addition, one can be born in a deaf family that rejects sign language or have deaf parents that are late signers. 'Native' appears to be a label based on artificial homogeneity supported by the assumptions that all natives have similar skills, similar attitude, similar cognitive abilities even though we know that the community is highly stratified.

4. Language Attitude Change in the Italian Deaf Community

Until very recently, Sign languages weren't considered true language both by the hearing majority and by the Deaf people themselves (Corazza & Volterra, 2008; Fontana et al. 2015). Since the Milan Congress of 1880, sign language was officially banned from the Schools of the Deaf and this resolution has had a lasting influence not only on the educational environment but also on the perception of sign language from the following generations of Deaf persons. Sign language was believed to dramatically affect the learning of speech as they were closer to gesture and not to language. For this reason, they were thought to be a sort of pantomime based on vague pictorial gestures linked only to concreteness without syntax. Deaf people have been

growing up with teachers that discouraged signing and that strongly invited them to speak. Therefore, their signing didn't even have a name. They called it gesture language, mime, gesticulation. Sign language was used within the family, in the Deaf Club and in other informal settings. At the end of the eighties, to sign in public context was felt inappropriate. In formal situation, spoken or signed Italian was preferred. For these reasons, many Deaf leaders at that time were fluent in speech and in signs. The general conviction was that only Italian had grammar and often good and fluent speech was associated with intelligence. Deaf people considered their communication 'wrong' but necessary. Under this premises, Deaf people did not feel the need of thinking about how sign language worked. They did not considered their language valuable. They used it within the family or among friends and never disseminated and promoted in the hearing majority.

The experience of community and deafness as a positive diversity is strongly interconnected with linguistic awareness. When research showed that sign language was a true language, the community gradually modified the attitude towards its language.

Sign language research started a true revolution, led to a new perception and ultimately shaped new forms of grammar. Linguistic awareness leads to look at language and community under new premises. Sign language gained a status: it had become a language to reflect on, to fight for and to teach. Changes in attitude and increased visibility (also by mean of professional interpreting services in TV and other official contexts) forced signers to think upon their language and define a notion of correctness. A line between what was Sign Language and what was not was drawn according to the criteria of autonomy, purism and identity preservation: forms and/or structures linked to Italian were rejected and a clear separation of sign language from co-speech gestures was made.

The need of norms and the search for purism have influenced LIS usage in interpreting services and in all kinds of media and social communication. New information technology has played an important role in the sharing of linguistic views and choices, spreading them to Deaf and hearing community that is now much wider than the originally local signing community.

The primary consequence of the growth of social, linguistic and cultural awareness within the signing community has been the shift from a language that was family-based and used only in informal communicative contexts to a language that is now also used in a wide variety of more formal contexts such as conferences, seminars, television news, university classes, private appointments with doctors and lawyers. This *diaphasic* form of variation has developed alongside the emergence of linguistic awareness within the community. Whereas in the past it was more appropriate to use signed Italian in formal contexts, today LIS is often the preferred language, depending on the context and/or the interlocutor. A further effect of this change has been that, over the course of recent years, LIS has developed a formal register as well as various subcodes and specialized registers, due to the fact that new contexts have become accessible.

With the emergence of linguistic and community awareness, the deaf community opposed a new in-group perspective based on issues of identity to the normalization philosophy promoted by the hearing majority.

5. Method

5.1 Participants

A sample of twelve deaf people from different part of Italy took part to an informal conversation with the author on the signing style of 4 signers on videos selected on the web.

The age range of the sample was between 28 to 82. In particular, signers belonged to these age groups: 1. From 28 to 52 years, and 2. Over 65 years.

The division into these age-groups was based on the following changing factors that affected linguistic attitude and perception during the development of language awareness: education (mainstreaming vs special schools); metalinguistic awareness; sense of belonging, participation to the Deaf Community. Gender issues, job and role played within the Community were taken into consideration.

Participants were recruited without taking into account whether they were native or not. Most of the participants were born to hearing families and learned sign language in their early childhood.

Table 1. Deaf Participants

	Gender	**First exposure to LIS**	**Age**	**School**	**Job**	**Area**
1.	F	Residential school	82	Residential	retired	South
2.	F	Residential school	82	Residential	retired	South
3.	F	Residential school	79	Residential	retired	South
4.	M	Residential school	82	Residential	retired	South
5.	M	Residential school	52	Residential	LIS teacher	North
6.	M	family	41	Residential	Researcher and LIS teacher	Centre
7.	F	family	46	Residential	LIS teacher	Centre
8.	F	Kindergarden	32	Mainstream school	Clerk	South
9.	M	Family	29	Mainstream school	Student	South
10.	F	Kindergarden	28	Mainstream	Student	South

5.2 Research Methodology and Procedure

To investigate deaf people's variation of LIS perception, the matched-guise technique (MGT) (Lambert et al., 1960) was re-designed in order to elicit attitudes towards the various videos selected on the web. The MGT has been used as indirect measurement of attitudes towards different varieties of language. Traditionally, this technique consists in participants listening to and evaluating a series of audio-recorded voices or "guises" that represents language varieties. In this research, deaf participants have evaluated 4 videos where signers used different formal registers of LIS. The MGT has been combined with the participant observation technique since signers were interviewed in a natural setting by the author. Furthermore, the author is part of

the community and takes part on discussion on the signing style very frequently. The interview was based on three basic questions on the videos of the sample which were presented with the Participant observation technique. This technique is an ethnographic method that include observation, interviewing and document analysis as means to collect data for qualitative analysis. It is based on an open, nonjudgmental attitude, being interested in learning what is meaningful for the individual and/or community under analysis (DeWalt & DeWalt 1998).

Questions were related to their opinions about the videos, the signers' style, and the differences they noted. Signers' evaluations were annotated or glossed but not video recorded as it would have affected the spontaneous setting.

The sample used in the MGT consisted of 4 videos (Note 3) of 1.00 mean where Deaf leaders or members of the Community gave information about events or initiatives. Their age mirrors the age range of the deaf participants. In particular, in video 1 and 2, two Deaf leaders (age over 65) give information to the Community related respectively to the Deaf Club and to the content of a video. In video 3, a Deaf psychologist (age range 28-55) gives information about LIS. In the last video, and a deaf woman explains the procedure to get a social bonus from the government. Signers are all active members of the Deaf Community.

These videos have been chosen following some specific criteria: their accessibility for the researcher; the representativeness of the events occurring in the signing community; their representativeness for the phenomenon under study. The videos were quite similar in their content but the nature of the LIS formal registers were different. In particular, video 1 and 2 have been selected because the signers belong to the older generation that preferred signed Italian to LIS; In video 3 and 4, signers are part of a generation that has developed a very positive attitude towards LIS and in formal situation use LIS. The sample was limited because the MGT has to be framed within the context of an informal conversation with the participant observation technique and could not be particularly committing.

6. Analysis and Results

The analysis of the MGT results seem to confirm the hypothesis of the present study that language awareness is correlated to language attitudes.

Participants provided different evaluation of the 'signing style' in the videos sample in relation with their age. A scale of sign language awareness (SLAS) was built following Culioli (1977-1978) and in accordance with the proposal of Fontana (2016).

Table 2. Sign language awareness scale

Level	Awareness	Ideology	Level of reflection on language	Identity and norms
0	No linguistic awareness	No awareness of the kind of language used	No reflection on the language used	Use of sign language
1	Epilinguistic awareness	No language ideology	Perception of variation	No norms or purism search
2	Epi-metalinguistic	Some language	Perception of variation and	Sense of

	awareness	ideology	features analysis	belonging, awareness of appropriateness and correctedness but no norms
3	Metalinguistic awareness	Language ideology; purism and preservation	Perception of variation, features analysis, correlation with norm	Sense of belonging; clear identity; active role within the community

According to Culioli (1977-1978), language users have a representation of their language that ranges from an implicit global to an explicit analytical level, from an epilinguistic to a metalinguistic level. Being aware of using a language means being aware at the epilinguistic level which represent the first level of language reflection. The epilinguistic level includes all silent activities conveyed in implicit linguistic skills and no language ideologies are present (Culioli & Normand, 2005; La Mantia, 2014). An intermediate area has been described by Ducard (2015, p.228) as epi-metalinguistic. The epi-metalinguistic is correlated to a less spontaneous and more controlled activity that is not analysed yet. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to reflect upon, analyze and describe a language and can be said to be present when users develop language ideology. Generally, metalinguistic awareness develops when a system of writing is established (Auroux, 1994). For unwritten languages such as LIS and other sign languages, however, metalinguistic reflection came about and continues to evolve due to other factors, such as new LIS research groups, discussions among new LIS language teachers as well as simply among the signers themselves (Volterra et al., 2022) in presence or on the social web. The level of awareness is measured in relation with some indicators like presence/absence of ideology, ability to identify parts of the language and norms, ability to distinguish LIS from other signed varieties (contact signing or signed Italian).

6.1 Explicit Attitudes

The groups 1 (respectively from 28 to 52) is aware at the level 2/3 of the SLAS. They labelled as old fashioned the formal register used in the video 1 and 2. All the participants defined the variety as signed Italian for a major use Italian mouthings and a minor use of other body components such as facial expression, head nods, body posture. Interestingly, it was not the presence but the nature of mouthing to be noted. For example, one participant explained: "you know that this man is not aware of sign language. Sometimes he uses mouthings whose meaning is disconnected from the sign. I mean, he is more aware of Italian than of LIS. He checks more his Italian than his LIS."

Although the variety used in the other videos (3 and 4) was labelled as LIS, some observation on LIS structure were made. It was observed the lack of facial expression and the high rate of mouthings that can be due also to the formal nature of the register. Some signs or structure were considered too linked to Italian. Overall, the group 1 was able to make a clear

distinction between LIS and signed Italian. One participant explained that some structures of this sample are closer to Italian because the signer, although young, does not make the effort to reformulate some concepts in LIS and rely too much on Italian.

Metalinguistic awareness is present since they can identify and motivate the variation and to describe the wrong usage of sign language by objectifying the rule that has not been followed.

Table 3. Group 1 (from 28 to 52)

level	Awareness	Ideology	Perception of variation	Language attitude
2	Epi-metalinguistic awareness	Some language ideology	Perception of variation and features analysis: Remarks on mouthings and on body components (facial expression, head nods, etc) Remarks on structure without explanation	Sense of belonging, no clear idea of norms and purism. awareness of Signed Italian
3	Metalinguistic awareness	Language ideology; purism and preservation	Perception of variation, features analysis, correlation with norm; Remarks on the nature of mouthings and of body components; on the lexical choice and on structure. Explanation of the norm	Sense of belonging; clear identity; generally active role within the community; awareness of the boundaries between LIS and signed Italian at the various level of analysis

Signers of the group 2 (over 65 years) seem to have a representation of sign language at the epilinguistic level. They made a difference between the videos included in MGT only in terms of clarity and accessibility of the information. They were not able to make a difference between the varieties of formal registers used in the videos. For two of them the meaning of the video 3 and 4 was not so clear because they were ‘too fast’. Two signers considered the video 1 and 2 much clearer as it was accompanied by clear mouthing. One of them argued that “to sign with the mouth too closed does not give clarity to signs”. One of them observed that old signers are much clearer because they sign and mouth at the same time. The four signers of the group 2 showed a particular sensitivity to the presence/absence of mouthing and to the slowness/fastness of signing. Their behaviour illustrates the presence of epilinguistic awareness in that they are able to perceive variation, but they are not able to analyse it.

Table 4. Group 2 (over 65)

level	Awareness	Ideology	Perception of variation	Language attitude
0	No linguistic awareness	No awareness of the kind of language used	No reflection on the language used	Use of sign language
1	Epilinguistic awareness	No language ideology	Perception of variation	No norms or purism search

6.2 Implicit Attitudes

Diversity of perception and evaluation of LIS variation mirrors a change in the attitude and ideology towards LIS. The old generation still consider Signed Italian more appropriate than LIS for formal situations and have not developed awareness on the nature of the LIS variation. Although the young generation has been educated in residential school and has experimented the stigmatization of LIS, most of them have learnt through seminars, conference and training courses that LIS has rules and that is a fully-fledged language. The old generation prefers to use Italian in formal situation because LIS in their perception is an informal familiar dialect. Conversely, the young generation is worried to clarify the differences between signed Italian and LIS and to specify that LIS is a rich language that can express any kind of meaning. For this reason, a participant remarks the importance of not being influenced by Italian and reformulating information following the LIS structure.

7. Discussion

This preliminary research has aimed at exploring the correlation between language attitude, awareness and language change. Language attitudes were measured through the MGT and have been correlated to the indicators of sign language awareness scale. High linguistic awareness (level 2/3) is associated to the capacity of recognizing and labelling the varieties, individuating features and structures that do not match the norms (eg. too many mouthings or too close to Italian; no facial expression) and, possibly, of explaining the norm if metalinguistic awareness is present (see table 3). Low linguistic awareness (level 1) is related to the ability of recognizing a variety and possibly expressing a judgement on it. Indeed, the group 2 has recognized the variation of LIS formal register and has indicated their appreciation of clear mouthing. Nevertheless, they have not identified Signed Italian or described norms. Overall, the two groups have both perceived LIS variation although they exhibit different level of linguistic awareness and attitudes towards the formal register presented through the MGT. On one side, the group 1 has stigmatized the use of features close to Italian and to Signed Italian as lack of linguistic awareness and identity and correlated it to a prejudiced language attitude towards LIS. This attitude was also found implicitly in the evaluation of group 2 that, conversely, found more acceptable the Signed Italian variety as it was ‘much clearer’ and ‘too fast’ the signing style of young people.

This changing language attitude is related to the development of LIS awareness. When Deaf people considered their language as a pantomime or as a primitive gestural code, they did not need to define it, nor to analyse or to describe and preserve it. They simply used it in their

familiar context. Italian was considered the only fully- fledged language in their repertoire and it was the most appropriate choice in a formal situation or in the interactions with hearing people (who did not need to learn a 'gestural code'). Deaf people gradually modified their perception of their own language and community thanks to the first Sign language research (Corazza & Volterra, 2008; Fontana *et al.* 2015). Sign language became a more valuable language and deafness a positive experience. This revolution, which has occurred in many languages (Auroux 1994), brings over some effects such as purism and identity preservation by the definition of a norm. Thus, tools such as sign language grammar description and vocabularies were promoted and disseminated. In Auroux's (1994) view, grammatical categories and tools (i.e. vocabularies) are created to analyse the language and make accessible a corpus of forms and rules that often users may not know or master. This process, named "grammatization", makes explicit the natural characteristics of languages, innovates the way users perceive them because new linguistic tools are created out of them and promote in turn new metalinguistic knowledge. Ideologies and attitudes of purism and identity preservation can be found in the attitudes of many participants of the group 1 towards some LIS features like mouthings or body components. For example, although recent research has shown that in everyday language ideology, mouthings are perceived as necessary (Fontana and Raniolo, 2015), young deaf people consider negative mouthing for its link to spoken language. The development of language awareness leads to differentiation, analysis and grammatization of language units towards certain directions that are determined by language attitude such as autonomy and differentiation from other languages in the repertoire and purism, i.e. promotion of more visual features or structures. Since LIS became a positive symbol of their own identity, Deaf people censored signed forms that were too close to Italian.

This shift in language attitude occurred in a bilingual repertoire and had an impact also on the role and status of Italian. Beforehand, it was important to be able to speak (also in terms of voice articulation): to speak Italian fluently was important especially when leadership positions within Deaf community were covered. LIS was not important as today. Nowadays, it is crucial not only to be able to sign but also to distinguish between LIS and Italian and use them appropriately. Very often, even if deaf people are fluent in Italian they prefer to sign and to be translated by an interpreter in order to promote their identity and linguistic rights. Language awareness modifies language attitude and shape the language following certain coordinates. The pathways of language change have been described by Culioli (1990) by borrowing the term creode from Waddington (1940. The concept of creode describes the developmental pathway followed by a cell as it grows to form part of a specialized organ. Development is explained with the metaphor of a ball rolling down a hillside, where the hill's contours channel the ball in a particular direction. In other words, epilinguistic activity displays some developmental paths whose direction is bound to certain constraints of the system. In the author's opinion, these pathways are correlated to changing language attitudes that are shaped by the language representations users have. They may range from an implicit global to an explicit analytical level, from an epilinguistic to a metalinguistic level. Creodes might visualize the developmental path towards the differentiation and analysis of language units. It's a path that leads from control to awareness, from implicit to explicit knowledge, from epi- to epi-meta activity and to metalinguistic awareness. Epigenetic landscapes

represent the interaction between linguistic, epi-, epi-meta and metalinguistic activity with the environment with its various developmental pathways or creodes during differentiation similar to those of a cell. Different epigenetic landscapes may result from the interaction of linguistic activity with various social factors. Language attitudes towards the two languages in the repertoire can lead different epigenetic landscape and pathways and shape the language following certain pathways. It may be the case, for example, that users are not aware of LIS and develop metalinguistic awareness only in the prestige language.

The concept of epigenetic landscape suggested by Culioli (1990) can enlighten the dynamics of variation along certain coordinates and include the languages in the repertoires. This is crucial in bilingual or multilingual repertoires where the two languages are always in contact and variation can be influenced, as we have seen, by the status of the two languages and by language attitude. Indeed, the evaluation of the two groups under study is always related to linguistic awareness and attitudes towards the two languages in the repertoire. For example, the group 1 that displays a high linguistic awareness, highlight the importance of LIS autonomy and stigmatize features that are linked or influenced by Italian such as the nature of mouthing. Conversely, the group 2 with a low linguistic awareness, appreciate clear mouthing and does not criticize structures close to Italian.

Through the matched guise and the participant observation techniques language attitude and perception were successfully elicited and correlated to language change phenomena. In the present study MGT has been adapted for testing deaf participants and a scale of SLA (Sign Linguistic Awareness) has been proposed. The adaptation of MGT presents however some limitations due to the visual nature of sign languages. Indeed, since it was not possible to anonymize the signed video, the participants could be influenced in their evaluation by their personal opinion on the signer. Another critical aspect of the methodological approach used is the participant observation paradox (Hymes, 1974) that is the that can be overcome only through self awareness and the capacity of managing the boundary between researcher and cultural member (Duncan and Diamond, 2011).

8. Conclusion

The present study has investigated the interplay between language awareness and attitude in shaping language variation and grammar. Results have shown that language awareness influences language attitude and shape language representation and ultimately grammar by modifying epigenetic landscapes. Language awareness can influence more general cognitive abilities such as to create mental representation, to categorize, to generalize and to form inferences (Pinto and El Euch, 2015).

For example, language awareness shapes language attitude towards certain LIS varieties and leads to the stigmatization of certain language features influenced by spoken Italian.

User-based approaches and linguistic ethnography are a starting point to link the micro- to the macro-sociolinguistic level of analysis (Copland and Creese, 2015) and the integration with corpus linguistics methods can offer interesting insights in building generalizations on language structures and patterns (Hodge and Goico, 2022). However, it is not easy to describe the multiformity of the communicative action in LIS and the correlation between language

awareness, attitude and change without running the risk of minimizing the complexity and simultaneity of the phenomena under consideration.

More theoretical and empirical research is needed to ascertain the nature of the correlation between language awareness, attitude and change, to develop and validate tools to measure it. For example, it is necessary to better tailor the matched guise technique and to verify its efficacy in eliciting language evaluation and to further structure the SLAS. Furthermore, such approach should be extended to a wider sample of signers from different part of Italy and with different education paths in order to explore the various epigenetic landscape that can develop within a bilingual and bimodal (signed and spoken) repertoire. What seems to be straightforward is that investigations on the correlation between language awareness, attitude and change are crucial not only in the field of Sign language research and its applications (Sign language acquisition, teaching and learning) but also to shed light on its nature in relation to spoken languages. Finally, a historical perspective can disclose whether and why some language attitudes have changed or persisted over time.

However, only by exploring language with a usage-based and ethnographic approach, new insights as well as generalization on this correlation can be proposed. Language is a complex dynamic system that is continuously shaped by users with their needs, their intentions, their values, their stories. Studying awareness, attitude and change may disclose the way how grammar emerges, changes and is preserved within a Community.

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Notes

Note 1. https://www.spreadthesign.com/it.it/search

Note 2. Mouth actions can be borrowed from the spoken language can integrate signing at various level or based on particular sounds (like air emission) or mouth configurations to convey extra information on meaning.

Note 3. Videos can be seen at the following links: 1) https://youtu.be/pRXez9A75Cw; 2) https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=186858739916887; 3) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UTsIJEDaUc; 4) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ng5VEuGWMg; 6) https://www.ens.it/notizie/9785-bonus-una-tantum-di-200-euro-chiarimenti-dell-inps-tradotti-in-lis

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