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DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE AS AWARE RECIPIENTS AND CREATORS OF THE CULTURAL OFFER

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Abstract: The article attempts to interpret accessing culture for people with hearing impairment from a perspective that takes into account social, cultural, and linguistic issues. The most important questions discussed in the first part of the article are the history of sign language and Deaf culture in Poland as well as ambiguities associated with distinguishing two methods of communication: sign language and signed system. Upon the basis of the above reflections the article considers the following issues: the role of the sign language interpreter in accessing culture

and the part played by the Polish language as a precarious medium for conveying information to people with hearing impairment. The theoretical stratum of the text alternates with practical guidelines and solutions, which might facilitate creating an offer addressed to this particular type of museum visitor. The summary contains a list of the most interesting projects being conducted in Poland, which could provide valuable inspiration for beginners involved in organising events dedicated to the deaf and hard of hearing.

Keywords: sign language, signed system, contact signing, Deaf culture.

About 900 000 Poles suffer from serious hearing impairment¹ – this is a highly differentiated group depending on the intensity of the dysfunction, preferred method of communication or personal decisions as well as identification with a concrete milieu. In our work, therefore, we encounter such definitions as: hearing impaired, hard of hearing, hearing disability, deaf, and many others. Regardless of this terminology, and thanks to the development of modern technology and widely comprehended social awareness, such persons increasingly often become guests of cultural institutions in which they seek and expect attractive events.

The accessibility of the educational-cultural offer addressed to this social group is systematically considered at pertinent conferences and in special-theme publications. In the course of recent years certain systemic solutions, excellently

described by Anna Żórawska from the Culture Without Barriers Foundation, have been conceived. The author of this article accentuated the most significant question, i.e. the differentiation of the needs of the titular milieu and the reason why we cannot be content solely with technological solutions.² The fundamental problem to be examined in this particular case deals with difficulties associated with linguistic barriers, resulting not only from familiarity (to a lesser or greater degree) with the Polish language but also from assorted variants of sign language communication.

Signed system or sign language?

The year 2017 marked the 200th anniversary of the Deaf and Dumb Institute in Warsaw, the first Polish school for children and adolescents with hearing impairment. This

date is identified with the origin of the Polish sign language,³ i.e. a natural visual-spatial language with grammar different from the Polish phonic language. In 1880, upon the basis of resolutions passed at the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, special schools introduced the oral method, which assumed that with suitable didactic rigour deaf and hard of hearing pupils are capable of fluently mastering speaking and lip reading, and thus officially banned the use of sign language. The low level of special teaching, however, brought about a successive turnabout in deaf education and the introduction in the 1960s of a method of communication situated between phonic language and visual-spatial speech, namely the signed system. This literal translation of the Polish sign language preserves grammatical word order and inflexions as well as obligatory speech. Both forms of communication: sign language (PJM) and signed system (SJM)⁴ function up to this day – at least theoretically – among people with hearing impairment.

Despite its long history Polish sign language still continues to be insufficiently studied. Researchers base themselves predominantly on knowledge transmitted by its native users, but despite their hard work they do not possess representative data demonstrating the official version of PJM, understood by all Poles suffering from deafness.⁵ Depending on a given region, milieu, age, and even the family environment in which a given person was brought up his/her lexical resource is different – sign language is full of variants and signs, which often complicate communication between its users. In addition, it contains neologisms and borrowings from foreign sign languages and remains under the impact of the Polish language and SJM. It is difficult, therefore, to speak about a “pure” or official variant of PJM because even at language courses succumbing to standardisation it is possible to notice differences in transmitted signs and information. The sign-language system has been simplified from the time of its origin because its complete form (with inflexions and speech) proved to be wasteful; thus, it has grown slightly similar to sign language. We are, therefore, dealing with a certain language spectrum spanning between two points: PJM with visual-spatial grammar and SJM with Polish-language grammar. Individuals using sign language will situate themselves nearer to or further from those extremities depending on the sort of communication strategy they formed during their lifetime.

In the face of such a linguistic situation we ought to ask whether it is good practice to proclaim that an event organised by us will be translated into PJM or SJM so that our recipients could decide independently which form they regard to be more suitable. Linguists specialising in sign language stress that a declaration made by a deaf person about the method of communication used by him could be at odds with reality.⁶ The differentiation claiming that the Deaf (i.e. the culturally deaf) use the Polish sign language while the (ordinary) deaf opt for the signed system is misleading. Statistically, only 10% of children⁷ with hearing impairment are born in deaf families, and actually only they are capable of naturally mastering sign language. The remaining children learn it later – usually when they are of school age – from their peers, while their earlier form of communication depends predominantly upon the parents and the methods of treatment selected by them.⁸ If one

were to define the culturally Deaf only *via* the earliest mastered language, then this group would be relatively small. If, however, we add the identity category then the group in question expands considerably.

The culture of the Deaf, specific for Poland but also similar to others across the world, came into being around sign language conceived as the binder of a certain community. Persons taking an active part in it declare that they are Deaf, with the capital letter accentuating that they consider themselves to be members of a linguistic minority.⁹ This is why it is possible to observe a fashion for nobilitating the natural sign language: many people are willing to proclaim that they use PJM and do not recognize SJM because the latter is at odds with their culture despite the fact that they grew up in families deaf for generations and their way of signing is decidedly closer to the signed system. The culture of the Deaf possesses certain motifs disclosed in, i.a. the visual arts, the most popular being hands, the ear, and the “family dog” – an idea initiated by Susan Dupor and her celebrated canvas: *Family Dog*.¹⁰ Just as frequent is the motif of audism, i.e. the inappropriate attitude of those with normal hearing towards the deaf, with the former wrongly claiming the right to decide about the latter’s needs, contrasted with the pride in their distinctness demonstrated by the Deaf. Just as necessary is an awareness of the existence of persons harbouring radical views and creating around sign language an elite of the “purebred Deaf” hostile towards bilingual persons and functioning among those with normal hearing.¹¹

The process of distinguishing recipients of cultural events organised by us into those using PJM and SJM is by no means obvious or, apparently, necessary. The deaf are accustomed to the fact that their milieu uses different sign languages according to the given region, age, and origin, and, as rule, are familiar with numerous variants of signs and willing to learn new ones. Contacts with those of normal hearing demands flexibility so that communicating could be effective and efficient. In sporadic situations someone wants to accuse us of incompetence and disrespect for the culture of the Deaf. Thanks to an enormous differentiation caused by the degree of hearing loss and mode of communication this milieu devised not only linguistic tolerance but also the skill of negotiating a code with the interlocutor. (...) *Contact between two different languages, between those of normal hearing and Deaf users of sign language always leads to a simultaneous emergence of (...) contact signing, i.e. signing in a situation of linguistic contact when assorted forms of the sign language system are used interchangeably depending on the given situation.*¹² The most important is to show initiative, to open up towards visitors using a different language in our cultural institution, to prepare ourselves professionally for their visit, and not to pay attention to the textbook form of sign language or the signed system.

Role of interpreters in accessing culture

The foundation of the activity pursued by the majority of accessible institutions are sign language interpreters but finding a suitable person with whom it would be possible to establish co-operation on a permanent basis proves to be extremely difficult. The first reason is the direct result of the status of PJM mentioned in the previous paragraph: the

Polish sign language is not as yet systematised and signs are differentiated not only regionally but also due to generations, professions, and families; in addition, it is affected by assorted interferences by the Polish language and the signed system. It is thus difficult to create concrete solutions and standards of the work conducted by interpreters. Practice shows that a good interpreter is not only a person who fluently masters the material taught at a language course (be it PJM or SJM), but who will also demonstrate a flexible approach to his tasks and remain constantly in touch with people using sign language. Consequently, the interpreter will be capable of adapting his manner of signing to the group with which he co-operates at the given moment and of controlling on a daily basis whether this group understands the transmitted messages. For the less experienced interpreter such rapid insight into the linguistic situation of his recipients and awareness whether he is being understood can pose an extremely demanding task. A solution could involve requesting that groups planning to visit our institution guarantee their own interpreter (as a rule, associations of this sort have such a permanent co-worker). If we are unable to cover the costs of a specialist, then it seems polite to propose reduced costs of the guided tour or to ensure free of charge entry.

A successive difficulty in finding a professional sign language interpreter is the outcome of the history of this profession, which evolved quite differently than that of the phonic language interpreter.¹³ Initially, work performed by the sign language interpreter was conceived predominantly as a way of compensating the disability – a task undertaken mainly by members of the closest family without suitable training. Signing, therefore, was not connected with any sort of social prestige. Only when sign language was recognized as a foreign language did the situation change and professionalisation followed.

We should remain aware of the fact that sign language interpreters work on a daily basis primarily in schools, offices, courts or medical institutions because these are the domains in which they are needed by members of those communities or the clients of those subjects. A few co-operate regularly with cultural institutions and thus possess a suitable vocabulary and sufficient general knowledge to undertake more difficult translations. Upon several occasions the author of this text experienced situations when an interpreter recommended by the deaf refused to co-operate because he felt incompetent in a given field. A lack of specialists is the reason why work on accessibility becomes extremely complex and requires time – searching for an interpreter is decidedly not enough and it is worthwhile making it easier for him to prepare himself for a concrete commissioned task by devising a brief scenario (of the lecture, the art exhibition preview, etc.) upon whose basis he would be able to find suitable signs ahead of time. In the case of a museum exhibition guided tour we can propose a list of professional terms connected with our institution and make it possible for the interpreter to meet a staff member so as to become acquainted with the exposition and to dispel eventual doubts. Such consultations not only facilitate preparation as regards terminology but also suitable organisation. The custodians of a given exhibition or museum educators have their favourite spots where they stop in the course of a tour – and are often unaware that this could become a spatial problem for the accompanying

interpreter. The person using sign language should never stand with his back to sources of light (e.g. a window) for two reasons: so that his face could be seen and because watching the interpreter against the light is uncomfortable and makes it decidedly difficult to observe him. Just as troublesome are shaded places or those, which distract (e.g. a large backdrop) – the background behind the interpreter should be as uniform as possible. Arranging consultations prior to the tour will cause all those present to feel more comfortable (including those staff members who rarely deal with so-called special needs groups).

Language preparations can be also made easier by recommending to the interpreter credible publications and dictionaries written in recent years with the co-operation of the cultural institution and the deaf. The first such aid is a lexicon conceived by the Group of Deaf Artists (GAG)¹⁴, containing signs from the domain of the fine arts, including highly specialised ones, which occur in the Polish sign language, and those borrowed from foreign sign languages or created specially for the needs of the lexicon. GAG is also the co-author (together with the Zachęta National Gallery of Art and the National Museum in Warsaw) of *Encyklopedia Sztuki w PJM*,¹⁵ in which we find brief definitions of terms from this range. A similar initiative, albeit encompassing a different thematic category, is *Minisłownik pojęć historycznych w PJM*, written upon the basis of workshops involving two editions of a historical project coordinated by the Culture Without Barriers Foundation.¹⁶ The purpose of those initiatives was the creation of educational material allowing persons with hearing impairment to enjoy full participation in cultural life; in my opinion, they are also a valuable source of knowledge for interpreters and facilitate their work not only owing to familiarity with signs but also by making possible descriptive translations should such a need arise.

Significance of the Polish language in the community of the deaf

In order to function efficiently and independently persons hard of hearing must be bilingual. The natural communication method is sign language corresponding to the visual-spatial order of thought, but the Polish language – at least its written variant – is indispensable for establishing contact with the majority of people: civil servants, teachers, co-workers, and frequently members of one's closest family. The Polish language is also a carrier of national heritage – the values that are the reason why we consider ourselves to be Poles. The national anthem, the literary canon, patriotic songs, proverbs – all are written down for the Deaf in a language, which they absorb as a second and thus foreign language. Despite the fact that they use the Polish language for many years the level of mastering it remains extremely divergent and, as a rule, low. This is due, predominantly, to a hampered attainment of the phonic language, which, for obvious reasons, is inaccessible. The universal conviction that lip reading suffices to understand those of normal hearing is untrue, because the majority of consonants in the Polish language are articulated inside the oral cavity – this method, therefore, does not make it feasible to immerse oneself fully in the language.

The model of bilingual teaching is only now being introduced into special schools, since the methodology of

teaching Polish calls for changes. Glottodidactics instructors and linguists stress the existence of a vicious circle *revealed in the fact that if a deaf person does not understand a given structure then it becomes simplified at school, but such simplification does not offer the deaf a chance for linguistic development, which, as a consequence, results in not understanding successive structures.*¹⁷ The outcome of this situation is mastering the Polish language upon an elementary level, which does not permit fluid communication with those of normal hearing via writing. This is also the reason why it is incorrect to assume that the Deaf do not require any special facilities because they can read descriptions of the exhibits or the programme contained in the catalogue. In such instances the ability to read does not denote total comprehension of texts often written in an official and sophisticated language. If, however, we change the perspective of viewing the deaf and see them not as “silent strangers” then we could create aids that – when we do not have at our disposal a sign language interpreter – will make it easier for them to make their way in our institution. It suffices to introduce into communication the principles of plain language adopted to deaf Poles¹⁸ and to devise information texts, e.g. exhibition guidebooks, brochures, and folders according to those rules.

Involvement of the deaf into accessing culture – summary

The creation by cultural institutions, including museums, of an educational-cultural offer adapted to the needs of visitors suffering from hearing impairment constitutes an immense challenge based on the task of interpreting not only words into gestures but also phonic and linear culture into visual and simultaneous culture. Practice shows that those solutions and projects whose realisation directly engages the deaf and hard of hearing pass the test best of all. The author of this article cited examples which she found to be the most interesting, although she also urged to embark upon independent quests – especially in the closest environment and on the websites of the Culture Without Barriers Foundation and the Foundation for Audiodescription Progress “Katarynka”, working for years for the sake of accessing culture to the disabled.

One of the best-known and recognizable initiatives of

this sort are monthly meetings held as part of the Zachęta Signs! cycle¹⁹ organised by the Zachęta National Gallery of Art. A deaf educator – Daniel Kotowski – acts as a guide at currently presented exhibitions and is translated into the Polish phonic language. Such a reversal of the scheme is an extremely interesting experience not only for the deaf, who eagerly make use of this opportunity, but also for those of normal hearing, who interact with contemporary art from the perspective of an unfamiliar language. A similar undertaking was broached by the Pan Tadeusz Museum in Wrocław, where four deaf artists interpreted selected fragments of the Pan Tadeusz national epic poem in accordance with the principles of sign language.²⁰ This event possessed dual merits – on the one hand, it brought persons with hearing impairment closer to one of the best-known works in Polish literature, and, on the other hand, it promoted the language and culture of the Deaf among those of normal hearing. An exceptional initiative placing the deaf in the very centre of the artistic message was realised in 2016 at Nowy Teatr in Warsaw. Wojtek Ziemliński and Wojciech Pustofa directed the spectacle: *Jeden gest* (One Gesture),²¹ in which the hard of hearing chief protagonists tell about their life and linguistic experiences. Four narrators represented assorted approaches to the culture of the Deaf as well as PJM and SJM, which could comprise thought-provoking educational material for persons interested in this topic. Finally, it is worth mentioning activity pursued in Lublin as part of the “Give me a sign” project,²² whose program is co-created by the interested parties. The title evokes the phenomenon of the deaf becoming accustomed to cultural institutions, which up to now they had visited rarely, by granting them their own sign – a proper name in sign language.

Preparing a programme in co-operation with the deaf is the reason why planned events become two-directional: on the one hand, they open up culture to persons with hampered access to it, and, on the other hand, they make it possible for them to propose its unique reinterpretation by applying a new medium, i.e. sign language. Such meetings and events are an interesting experience not only for persons with hearing impairment but also for those of normal hearing, who via contact with works of art, different from the heretofore one, now look at them from another perspective, discover their new meanings, and become better acquainted with the culture of the Deaf.

Przypisy

¹ *Raport o osobach niepełnosprawnych w Polsce, przygotowany przez Biuro Prasowe Kongresu Kobiet w 2011 r. w Warszawie.*

² A. Żurawska, *Gość z niepełnosprawnością słuchu w muzeum*, in: *ABC. Gość niepełnosprawny w muzeum*, „Szkołenia Narodowego Instytutu Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zbiorów” 2013, no. 2, p. 53.

³ A new worldwide phenomenon involves dependence between the emergence of special schools and that of national sign languages; in a widely recorded case of a school in Nicaragua scientists could observe the evolution of sign language in the course of about 40 years. This process is a natural consequence of gathering in one spot persons with impaired hearing who create a new way of communicating. More information on: <http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl/ledge/x/10004>, *Głuche dzieci stworzyły własny język* [accessed on: 5 June 2018].

⁴ The article intentionally omits a detailed description of methods of communication since this is an extremely extensive topic. More information in: M. Czajkowska-Kisil, *Głusi, ich język i kultura*, in: *Lingwistyka przestrzeni i ruchu. Komunikacja migowa a metody korpusowe*, P. Rutkowski, S. Łozińska (ed.), Wydział Polonistyki UW, Warszawa 2014, pp. 17-37; P. Wojda, *Język migowy w Polsce – jeden czy wielu odmianach. Przesłanki do badań nad głuchotą*, in: *Deaf Studies w Polsce*, M. Sak (ed.), Polski Związek Głuchych Oddział Łódzki, 2014, pp. 201-216.

⁵ *Korpusowy Słownik Polskiego Języka Migowego*, <http://www.sloownikpjm.uw.edu.pl> [accessed on: 11 May 2018].

⁶ M. Dunaj, *GŁUCHY-ŚWIAT. Głuchota w perspektywie antropologii zaangażowanej*, Łódź 2015, p. 44.

⁷ *Sytuacja osób głuchych w Polsce. Raport zespołu ds. g/Głuchych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich*, M. Świdziński (ed.), Warszawa 2014, p. 9.

- ⁸ M. Dunaj, *GŁUCHY-ŚWIAT. Głuchota...*, p. 45.
- ⁹ <https://adfalkiewicz.com/?p=2584>, *O niesłyszącym rodzinnym psie, który chce oglądać Misia z napisami* [accessed on: 21 May 2018].
- ¹⁰ This canvas depicts a deaf person brought up among persons of normal hearing and reduced to the role of a pet animal that, although a member of the family, is treated differently than the others. The dog demands attention, does not understand what is said to it, and asks to be accepted and praised by its family.
- ¹¹ <https://adfalkiewicz.com/?p=2584>, *Niesłyszący, Głuchy, język migowy, niemigający głuchy, niedosłyszący, słabosłyszący, głuchy mówiący, yyy... wtf?* [accessed on: 21 May 2018].
- ¹² P. Tomaszewski, T. Piekot, *Język migowy w perspektywie socjolingwistycznej*, in: „Socjolingwistyka” 2015, vol. XXIX, p. 77.
- ¹³ A. Pliszki, *Tłumaczenie w języku migowym a tłumaczenia ustne w językach fonicznych*, in: *Teoria i dydaktyka przekładu konferencyjnego. Z badań Instytutu Lingwistyki Stosowanej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego*, M. Tryuk (ed.), Wydawnictwo Takt, Warszawa 2006.
- ¹⁴ *Leksykon GAG*, <http://www.gag.art.pl/leksykon/>
- ¹⁵ *Encyklopedia Sztuki w PjM*, <http://www.mnw.art.pl/multimedia/filmy/encyklopedia-sztuki-w-pjm/>
- ¹⁶ *Minisłownik pojęć historycznych w PjM*, <http://kulturabezbarier.org/slownik-historia-pjm,m,mg,20,194>
- ¹⁷ J. Kowal, M. Jura, M. Januszewicz, *Różnice w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego słyszących cudzoziemców i głuchych Polaków*, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2014, p. 79.
- ¹⁸ E. Moroń, *Jak pisać teksty adresowane do głuchych Polaków? - Efektywnie. Transformacje językowe i typograficzne instrukcji w dostosowanych arkuszach egzaminacyjnych P7 części humanistycznej po III klasie gimnazjum (2012-2014)*, in: *Edukacja niesłyszących - wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, E. Woźnicka (ed.), Wyd. Akademii Humanistyczno-Ekonomicznej w Łodzi, Łódź 2017.
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- ²⁰ *Tej ciszy chwila w Soplicowie*, <https://muzeumpanatadeusza.ossolineum.pl/pl/aktualnosci/tej-ciszy-chwila-w-soplicowie>
- ²¹ *Jeden Gest*, <http://www.nowyteatr.org/pl/event/Jeden%20gest>
- ²² *Daj mi znak*, <https://dajmiznak.com/kontakt/>

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