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# Contested linguistic heritages: CODAs and denaskuloj in comparison

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### **Abstract**

In the contemporary world, with more and more people and languages in contact, the goal of inclusive societies should pass through the appreciation and valorization of heritage languages, both spoken and signed. Many of them are often contested, i.e., not considered full-fledged languages, or less valuable, by the majority of society. This paper presents two case studies of contested language heritages: CODAs, i.e., hearing children of Deaf parent(s) and denaskuloj, i.e. Esperanto family speakers. We focus on CODAs who can sign fluently and denaskuloj who speak fluently. Regardless of different patterns in society and culture, the sociolinguistic situations of both cases show interesting similarities. We address the in-group attitudes of CODAs and denaskuloj based on preliminary qualitative data, in order to propose feasible strategies to increase the prestige of minority spoken and sign languages alike.

### **Résumé**

Dans le monde contemporain, où de plus en plus de personnes et de langues sont en contact, l'objectif de sociétés inclusives devrait passer par l'appréciation et la valorisation des langues patrimoniales, tant parlées que signées. Très souvent, ces langues sont contestées, c'est-à-dire qu'elles ne sont pas considérées comme des langues à part entière mais comme quelque chose de moins précieux, par la majorité de la société examinée. Cet article présente deux études de cas de patrimoines linguistiques contestés : Les CODA, c'est-à-dire les enfants entendants de parents sourds, et les denaskuloj, c'est-à-dire les locuteurs familiaux d'espéranto. Nous nous concentrons respectivement sur les CODA qui peuvent signer couramment et les denaskuloj qui parlent couramment. Indépendamment des différents modèles sociaux et culturels, les situations sociolinguistiques des deux cas présentent des similitudes intéressantes. Nous abordons les attitudes de groupe des CODAS et des denaskuloj, sur la base de données de recherche de qualité préliminaire, afin de proposer des stratégies réalisables pour accroître le prestige des langues parlées et des langues des signes.



## Keywords

CODAs, sign language, Esperanto, denaskuloj, denaskulo, denaskismo, contested languages.

## Article

### 1. Language contestedness in sign languages and Esperanto

One of the reasons behind the difficulties in preserving and promoting many regional and minority languages across Europe is their contestedness, as the volume edited by Tamburelli and Tosco (2021a) recently illustrated. Eventually, their vitality and vigour decrease, and that hinders their linguistic emancipation, up to the point at their “linguageness” is contested even by their speakers, and therefore they are not counted in the linguistic repertoire (Tamburelli 2021, p. 27). Gobbo (2021) shows that the notion of language contestedness can be applied also to Esperanto, often accused of being “artificial”, in the pejorative sense of “unnatural”. Sign languages are often wrongly assumed to be a mere “variant” of the majority language they are in contact with (Woll, 2006), while the Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), for instance, has drastic grammar differences from Dutch (Klomp, 2021).

Up to the authors’ knowledge, the notion of contestedness as illustrated above was never applied to sign languages until now, and sociolinguistic comparisons between Esperanto and sign languages are very few (Spruijt 2017, Astori 2016). This paper aims to illustrate the two case studies of CODAs and denaskuloj in terms of language contestedness, through a preliminary set of qualitative data. CODAs are hearing children of Deaf parent(s) while denaskuloj (Esperanto word for “the ones that come from birth”) are children that learn Esperanto in the family, usually from the parents (see Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Fiedler, 2012).

It is important to state that the authors belong to neither of the two studied groups<sup>1</sup>; however, the goal to support all contested languages and in particular overcome stigmas towards signers and Esperanto speakers remains.

### 2. Esperantists and the Deaf: analogies and differences

Astori (2016) points out striking similarities between the identities constructed up by Esperantists, i.e., language activists engaged to promote Esperanto in all possible ways, and the Deaf people, i.e., people who use a sign language as their primary mean of (visual-oriented) communication. On the other hand, Gobbo (2021a, 2017) argues that there is a mainstream Esperanto Movement vis-à-vis ideologically loaded Esperantisms, and therefore we should talk about Esperanto identities in the plural, analogously to the plural use for Deaf identities, following Leigh and O’Brien (2019).

The general lack of recognition of sign languages in the public sphere is one of the arguments for contesting their “linguageness”, reflected in terms of officiality (De Meulder, Murray and McKee, 2019), and, eventually, such a contestedness influences the attitudes of their users and citizens in general, as the case study of Hong Kong Sign Language shows (Gan & Gobbo, 2019). Esperanto is an official language in no state or supranational institution. We argue that CODAs and denaskuloj show interesting data on the relation between contestedness and identity, as both groups did not choose to belong to their respective communities. Ultimately, an ideological self-positioning in respect to Deaf and Esperanto identities for CODAs and denaskuloj respectively is simply unavoidable.

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1 Xuan Zheng is Deaf.



### 3. The interviews with CODAs and denaskuloj

Our qualitative study on the two groups is mini scale, therefore results are preliminary. We separately conducted semi-structured interviews with five CODAs (3F 2M, mean age 32, median age 33) in mainland China and five denaskuloj (3F 2M, mean age 27, median age 26) in the European Union. The interviews to the CODAs were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and the denaskuloj in Esperanto. The interview questions focus on four main aspects: growing experience; use of their heritage language (Chinese Sign Language<sup>2</sup> or Esperanto); attitudes towards sign languages or Esperanto, and related cultural and identity issues as CODAs or denaskuloj.

All five CODAs share similar background in terms of the exposure and the use of a sign language: They were raised by Deaf parents and have been using the local sign language within the family since young; Three are parents. As an adult, their current professions are closely related to the Deaf community, either as a sign interpreter or a teacher at a deaf school. Conversely, the denaskuloj share their background only sociologically, as they all are university students (in different disciplines), and they are not parents. The exposure of Esperanto vary from the OPOL (one person, one language) to “partial nativeness”, i.e. listening Esperanto spoken between the parents without speaking it until becoming a teenager. While two of the denaskuloj have some work experience with language-related professions, they do not involve Esperanto actively.

#### 3.1 The place of the languages in the family

The use of Esperanto and sign languages in the family is very different, especially in the necessity of the language. When Esperanto is spoken in the family, it is driven by the parents’ choice: because they want to raise a multilingual child, it is the only common language of the parents, or it holds a particular importance to them. No interviewees mentioned any interest in Esperanto by the extended family; rather, the experience of the Esperanto community is considered valuable: “I want my children to have the same life opportunities I received from my parents that only Esperanto can give.” On the other hand, the use of a sign language in the family is driven by communicative need, which applies to the extended family. The three CODAs who are parents all taught their children signing to communicate with their children’s Deaf grandparents.

While the children of an Esperanto family do not have a special role as bridges between their parents and the surrounding society, all five CODAs attest specifically the compelling necessity of interpreting for their parents in daily life since childhood. The reality of daily interpreting affects the CODAs’ attachment to their language differently. Two CODAs commented it as a common part of their daily life, and one said interpreting for the parents brings him a sense of achievement. On the other hand, one CODA mentioned that she felt reluctant to interpret in the “endless situations”, especially when she was young. Another CODA was asked to interpret for her Deaf parents and hearing grandparents in their daily quarrels throughout her childhood.

The place of the two languages in the linguistic repertoire shows a considerable level of variety. Hoffmeister (2002) shows that within the family, the extended family of CODAs plays an important role for their exposure of spoken language(s) and the relative culture(s), especially during childhood. They also get such exposure from the surrounding societies when they “step out the house”. Nevertheless, two CODAs mentioned their “lower proficiency” in Chinese, one judges herself as “having occasional

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<sup>2</sup> The five CODAs use different local dialectal varieties of Chinese Sign Language. When referring to language towards and language use, we will use the plural form ‘sign languages’ to avoid the misconception of ‘Deaf people use one unified sign language’.



hard-time looking for a proper word while interpreting from sign language to Mandarin”, the other was judged by her teacher in middle school that “some of her Chinese sentences were ungrammatical”<sup>3</sup>. There are no similar studies on the multilingualism of denaskuloj. However, the ten interviews to denaskuloj (different population from the interviewees) by Besenyei-Merger (2021) show that the language(s) of the surrounding societies are generally taken for granted, while the main concern is fully acquiring Esperanto.

### 3.2 Signs of contestedness: from shame to pride

Tamburelli and Tosco (2021) show that the attitudes towards contested languages are often polarized towards either sharp positive or negative results. In our interviews, some, but not all, CODAs revealed experiences related to shame outside family settings. A common instance is that when signing with parents on the street, people would “stare at them with a weird look”, or even mock them. CODAs sometimes would put aside Deaf behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in order to participate smoothly in the Hearing world (Hoffmeister, 2002). Trying to avoid discrimination, two CODAs said they would avoid signing with their parents in public. On the other hand, despite the sense of shame imposed by the external discrimination, all five CODAs clarified that they never think sign languages are ugly. In three of our interviews, denaskuloj reported similar anecdotes of people reacting negatively on the streets. However, the parents in these cases either firmly stopped the annoying behaviour or, patiently, they explained that they speak Esperanto to the curious. All the interviewees reported fatigue from “repeating the same old story justifying that Esperanto is real, not fake”, and have developed strategies to briefly explain this.

The main difference between the groups lies in the perception of the parents and the reaction in school. In the case of CODAs, unfortunately it is not uncommon that Deaf parents are misjudged, and there is also problematic sympathy. One CODA told us she was taught by the hearing relatives that she should always excuse her Deaf mother’s bad temper when they encountered communication problems, as “she is deaf, you cannot expect too much from her”. In the case of Esperanto parents, they are well equipped “to fight against the attacks”, and this “gave me a sense of security”, as reported by one of the interviewees. Unlike CODAs, denaskuloj were never downplayed because of their parents. All denaskuloj reported that Esperanto was basically ignored in school, while CODAs often, but not always revealed themselves when the parents were involved in the school talking with teachers. When asked about the place of Esperanto in their school experience, the answer was marginalization and invisibility. “It helped me in studying Latin and French”, said one interviewee, while another said “I once chose Esperanto as a subject for a one-week group project in the gymnasium, it was the best week of my school years”.

## 4. Final remarks

Although similarities are attested in terms of language attitudes and identities, there are differences between our two groups. When asked “Between the Deaf and the hearing world, which one do you belong to?”, all five CODAs answered “both”, though two of them were inclined towards the Deaf world. For denaskuloj, when asked a comparable question, four answered “both”, while one denied any sense of belonging to the Esperanto world, as Esperanto is “only the language of my family” for them. Interestingly, not all denaskuloj explicitly like Esperanto. As two of them said: “It was given to

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3 From a linguistic perspective, these occasions are not uncommon for bimodal bilinguals, which indicate the activation of both languages, signed and spoken, i.e., they are not enough evidence to judge that the two CODAs are non-native-like in Chinese (Emmorey et al., 2008; Lillo-Martin et al., 2016).



me”, “It is a part of me, I do not necessarily like”. Although all five CODAs said “I like sign language”, some hold stronger emotional feelings than the other. Three of the five CODAs expressed strong affective attachment: “(Chinese) Sign Language is my first language... very often I would prefer to sign over speaking”. “It brings me a sense of familiarity, it’s part of my life”. Other two expressed more neutral attitude. In addition, two CODAs said they would be understanding to negative views on sign languages.

All of our interviewees show strong sensitivity to the differences between their two worlds, the needs of the language users, in terms of communication gaps (for sign languages), and lack of a more equal acknowledgement of existence and respect (for Esperanto). Despite being hearing, as a subgroup of the Deaf world, CODAs often need to learn about the contestedness that Deaf communities encounter (Hoffmeister 2002, and discussion above). Both CODAs and denaskuloj eventually resort to either “go with the flow” or “open fight”. In the first strategy, they simply enjoy the language, if the surrounding environment allows, while in the second, they become language activists, putting the contested language identity up to the front. This resonates with the finding in Gan & Gobbo (2019) that hearing people who are closely involved in Deaf communities are well aware of the restrictions of the Deaf and the Hearing world. Moreover, Gobbo (2021a), notes that denaskuloj who become language activists do not acquire a special status among other Esperanto speakers, as they share the same struggle for language rights and justice.

For CODAs, the role of interpretation can be regarded as a communicative modality issue, as Deaf people do not have good access to spoken languages, while denaskuloj do not experience this. This resonates with the different relations the two groups have with their parents. Moreover, while denaskuloj do not use Esperanto for their career, CODAs often make use of their bilingualism becoming professionals thanks to the sign language they received.

In sum, the comparison between the two groups reflects that sign languages and Esperanto both play the role of bridges, but differently: sign languages act as a crucial bridge between the Deaf and non-Deaf worlds, while Esperanto’s role as a bridge across the nations is more a matter of ideology.

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