Abstract

SignLEF (2011-2013) is a project of the Lifelong Learning Programme funded by the European Commission. Its aim is to develop a common basis for presenting three sign languages (Austrian, Catalan and Italian Sign Language) in accordance with the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages.

The CEFR describes the competences necessary for communication related to the six levels A1 to C2 and to speech acts as well as fields of communication, also providing the necessary grammar and lexical inventory. So far only spoken languages benefit from CEFR. Although different innovative sign language projects in this field are taking place, there is no description of any sign language that completely follows the principles of the CEFR yet.

The main aims of SignLEF are the adaptation of the CEFR for sign languages and the development of proposals for respective courses. There are two reasons to look for an inclusion of sign languages into the CEFR framework; the first is a political one: sign languages do get the chance to reach equal status as spoken languages have. The second is a pedagogic and linguistic one: an established concept for language learning and competence evaluation is applied to a new area: sign languages.

SignLEF supports linguistic diversity in the European Union and helps to improve the quality of sign language teaching. SignLEF aims at promoting the awareness for sign language and deaf culture, as well as for teaching and learning methods for sign languages. The outcome will be a strengthening of sign language users' rights as citizens and their improved access to equal opportunities as well as a greater respect for and improved treatment of sign languages, so that they may attain the same status as spoken minority languages.

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Council of Europe recommends the use of the CEFR for the validation of language competences [1]. The CEFR document describes the competences necessary for communication as well as their relations to situations and fields of communication. The CEFR is now a key reference document which unifies the instructions for learning and teaching languages for over 35 languages. It facilitates the definition of teaching and learning objectives and methods and provides tools for a competence assessment.

The CEFR developed six levels of language competence:
- A Basic speaker
  - A1 Breakthrough or beginner
  - A2 Waystage or elementary
- B Independent Speaker
  - B1 Threshold or intermediate
  - B2 Vantage or upper intermediate
- C Proficient Speaker
  - C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced
  - C2 Mastery or proficiency

2. CEFR and Sign Languages

The CEFR was implemented in several educational systems; however, so far the respective documents were only developed for spoken languages. There are only isolated level descriptions available for French and Spanish Sign Language (LSF and LSE). Additionally, there were and are sign language projects in relation to the CEFR in the United Kingdom [2], Switzerland, Ireland [3] and France, but there is no description of any sign language yet which follows the principles of the CEFR completely. Therefore in 2011 an "Exploratory Workshop" funded by the European Science Foundation in Zurich aimed at setting up a Europe-wide collaborative network [4].

There are two main reasons to strongly promote the inclusion of sign languages into the CEFR
framework: Politically sign languages get the chance to reach equal status as spoken languages. Pedagogy and linguistics get an established concept for language learning and competence evaluation. This is a considerable progress as not all European sign languages are acknowledged yet and not all sign language communities are offered a full description of their language.

As a consequence of these objectives, the linguistic work on the inclusion of sign languages into the CEFR framework has to obey a central goal: it has to present the full comparability and functional equivalence of sign languages with spoken ones. This can only be reached if the sign-language-related CEFR is as close to already existing spoken-language-related CEFR as possible. This means that the given structure of the CEFR has to be taken over: no CEFR feature may be disregarded for sign languages and only necessary changes/complements have to be done in order to respect the typological properties of sign languages. Using the full comparability of a sign-language-related CEFR to the spoken-language-related CEFR as a criterion means to present a translation of the general content (e.g. on learners and learning) into the respective sign languages and to show all language competence oriented parts (speech acts, lexicon and grammar descriptions) completely for every sign language.

Compared to the spoken languages which are represented within the CEFR framework, there are some main points to be taken into consideration:
the factual non-existence of a writing system for sign languages (though SignWriting is spreading)
the representation of the typological characteristics of sign languages
the representation of deaf culture.

3. SignLEF

The SignLEF project (2011-2013) is funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme (KA2 Languages) of the European Commission. The involved partners are the University of Barcelona (coordinator) (E), the Istituto Statale Sordi di Roma (I) and the University of Klagenfurt (A). This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The main aims of SignLEF are the adaptation of the CEFR for sign languages and the development of proposals for respective courses. As many prerequisites for this adaptation (e.g. huge corpora of the target languages, internationally accepted courses and materials for learning them, complete grammars and dictionaries) are missing, SignLEF will only be able to produce parts of the intended sign-language-related CEFR and the course proposals. Further work has to be organised.

The whole project is based on ICT: Sign language texts are recorded and administrated electronically; users will have complete access to the signed texts, all documentation and instruction via the internet.

4. General linguistic aspects

The only adequate basis for a comparison of languages are communicative functions related to specific situations and described by speech/signing acts. Based on these functions and acts, authentic sign language texts have to be produced. Concerning the criterion of “authentic”, the task of adequate instruction of Deaf signers is not trivial: the functions and acts are up to now only described in written language; the same is valid for examples. We know from linguistic fieldwork that using examples from other languages would considerably bias the sign production.

Having regard to Deaf cultural-specific information and values has to be a constructive principle for all parts of a sign-language-related CEFR.

5. The method applied

In a first developmental step, the Austrian team - following the project proposal - developed a course concept in terms of (scripted) lessons, based on “Breakthrough”; lexicon, dialogues and exercises were filmed. For the adaptation of CEFR to Austrian Sign Language, the team of deaf and hearing co-workers compared the description of the competence levels for English, German as well as with LSF and a version of British Sign Language (BSL QED) [3]. In a first step a common description of the six levels was developed and filmed by our deaf colleagues.

We soon realised that it would take us too long to follow the course concept; the main reason being that the CEFR concept itself does not offer any course, but only the prerequisites for courses in general. Therefore we had to decide first to develop the CEFR basics, as there are speech acts with associated grammar and lexicon. We also decided to work without any written texts to be used as a model for the sign language production by our deaf colleagues.

As the speech act list is central within CEFR, we started to realise all speech acts contained in the list in Austrian Sign Language (OEGS). The connection of single speech/signing acts into dialogues was
shifted to a later stage of work. The advantage of this strategy is that - in full accordance with the spoken-language-related CEFR - every single speech act is documented and can be looked up individually. Using the speech act lists for English and German \cite{5, 6}, the team developed a respective speech act list for OEGS, comprising levels A1 to B2 (CEFR does not offer speech act lists for level C), adapted to sign language and deaf culture when necessary. In order to give the reader an idea of the size of CEFR: level A1 and A2 contain 88 speech acts and about 1580 lexical items; the four levels A1 to B2 contain about 400 speech acts and about 3-4000 lexical items (very much dependent on the respective topics and the size of their realisation). If different variants of single speech acts are considered, the expectable amount of examples (= videos) with grammatical description and eventual translation into a spoken/written language for pedagogical purposes will reach about 1000-1500.

This speech act list served as the basis for our deaf colleagues: they were asked to realise them disregarding German written examples; if any single speech act description was unclear, only an explanatory description was discussed in sign language, not giving any spoken nor sign language example. The deaf colleagues were asked to produce realistic examples of the speech acts and were especially motivated to produce more than one variant (cf. Fig.1.). After having filmed all variants they should assign each variant to the general levels A or B, using their didactic experience from sign language courses held at the university. Until the end of the project we will realise as many speech acts as possible. The grammatical analysis of the variants and their translation into German and English will be done in later stages of the project.

If the team reaches the conclusion that the simplest variants of speech acts have not been produced yet, we will discuss the criteria for simplicity in grammar, lexicon or pragmatics and then produce the "easiest" variants for the first level. This should guarantee a hierarchy of complexity within different variants of speech acts.

E.g.: The speech act of turn-taking can be fulfilled in a very simple way e.g. by using please respective gesture); this is assigned to A1. For an explicit realisation of this speech act, one should sign a sentence like Please, take your turn now! or You are next! this is assigned to level A2 or B1. Many speech acts can be fulfilled by producing very simple utterances (e.g. no, yes or another single word or phrase) or by grammatically rather complex ones. Such complex utterances then often explicitly represent only the single speech act intended. In other words: When assigning speech acts realisations to levels, the grammatical-lexical and pragmatic complexity of the respective realisation has to be evaluated.

Additionally, Klagenfurt started cooperation with the Department of Translation Studies at the Universi-
ty of Graz (cf. [http://www.uni-graz.at/ital/](http://www.uni-graz.at/ital/)): students of this department were asked to adapt and translate GERS texts to Austrian Sign Language and deaf culture: some texts of GERS had to be discussed in class several times. The students filtered out the most important parts of these texts in order to make the German version of the CEFR more user-friendly. Finally, chapter 1 and 3 of GERS were adapted; chapter 2 let outside as there are so many repetitions. The developed texts were filmed and edited.

### 6. Results and impact

The Results of Sign LEF for Austria will be presented on our SignLEF-webpage ([http://signlef.aau.at/](http://signlef.aau.at/)) which can show some parts already, e.g. the general project description (cf. Fig. 2), the general description of the CEFR levels, the above-mentioned introduction to CEFR. Soon examples for speech acts will also be available.

![SignLEF](image)

Fig. 2. Realisation of the general project description

The impact of SignLEF and its necessary follow-up activities will be a complete description of three sign languages following the principles of CEFR. This will serve deaf instructors of sign language as well as deaf and hearing learners and users of sign languages: they will have an ordered collection of sign language materials as well as an instrument at hand which allows to discuss competence levels and shows respective grammar and lexicon information. Every country which ratifies the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will have to establish sign language trainings which are competitive to spoken language trainings. A sign-language-related CEFR is a major contribution to this competitiveness as it allows comparison across all languages having a CEFR description.
References