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# The Success in Creating an International Perspective on Sign Language Policy

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De Meulder, M., Murray, J. J., & McKee, R. L. (Eds.) (2019). *The legal recognition of sign languages: Advocacy and outcomes around the world*. Multilingual Matters. Paperback. 352 pages. \$39.95

The 2019 book *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World*, edited by Maartje De Meulder, Joseph J. Murray, and Rachel L. McKee, is a delight for me for one simple reason. When I was younger, I went abroad to multiple countries around the world and was exposed to a variety of sign languages. I also used to work as a volunteer teacher for deaf children in Thailand. My other experiences include providing leadership training to deaf people residing not only in Thailand but in Colombia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Germany, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar. For other reasons, I went to Costa Rica, South Africa, and Tibet. In my home country, Canada, I grew up as a deaf person in Nova Scotia with the two sign languages used by my deaf parents. My father knows American Sign Language (ASL), and my mother is most comfortable with the Maritime Sign Language. Multilingualism is my life.

As I read *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages*, I found it affirmed my experience of all the challenges that the deaf communities in the different countries I visited have faced in getting their sign languages recognized. The universal phenomenon of deaf people being signers is something to respect, admire, and celebrate. Historically, using sign language in a classroom was banned during the election at a Milan conference (1880), and today, sign language is accessible and should be used by every deaf person in any given society. Sign language is a natural language for deaf people as much as spoken language is for hearing people. From my view, society has the responsibility to see that young deaf children become signers through an appropriate and rich signing environments. Without this support, deaf children are at great risk of linguistic deprivation. I am fortunate to have deaf parents (as most deaf children are rather born to hearing parents and often find themselves not learning any sign language), as I became a native signer and had the opportunity to learn many more sign languages over the years.

With this in mind, I attended the World Federation of the Deaf Congress held in Paris in July 2019. There, I was fortunate enough to witness the diversity of sign languages of various countries. I came to believe that signing is everywhere, even though it can be denied to deaf individuals due to poorly conceived policies and limited access. A significant number of hearing people are inclined to take language for granted by speaking one or more languages, yet not knowing much, if at all, about sign languages. The government and the education system in particular have some discriminating ideas about how deaf children best learn and use language. With *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages*, however, I applauded the editors for assembling a book that targets policies related to the sign languages throughout the world.

The book covers multiple countries, which is vitally important for any international study. Among the countries covered in *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages* are (in alphabetic order): Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Catalonia (Spain), Chile, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Scotland (Great Britain), South Korea, Turkey, and Uganda, the United States, and Venezuela. The eighteen chapters are written by different contributors who share various strategies to achieve the legal recognition of various sign languages and to show the barriers that they have overcome. The book will be of interest to sign language activists, educators, policymakers, researchers in deaf studies, and those who specialize in sign language linguistics, sociolinguistics, human rights law, and applied linguistics.

The chapters are categorized into four parts based on their distinctive emphases: 1) Recent Sign Language Laws, 2) Implicit Legal Recognition, 3) Ongoing Campaign Towards Explicit Legal Recognition, and 4) Implementation of Sign Language Laws. Readers will learn about new sign language laws being created that are worthy of attention. However, legal recognition can either be implicit or explicit, and the trend is set to favor laws that are explicit rather than implicit. Also included in this discussion are

campaigns and strategies, as well as some barriers, in the legislative process. This book illustrates how advocacy for sign language legislation takes place within language policies in different countries. The advocacy activities depend on the intersections among language ideologies, public policy, and discourses within deaf communities. Based on the legislative challenges explored in this book, it is unsurprising that deaf communities will need to fight to achieve any meaningful sign language legislation. Audism is prevalent and has continued unabated for so long. In general, people may be unfamiliar with the language used by deaf people and unable to address terms adequately in legislative or medical situations.

Additionally, the book is highly organized, and the editors prove to be experts in the area of sign language policy. In the first part of the book, the editors provide substantial information about the legislative process, the steps taken, and how resistance can be overcome. Policy discussions can often be dry and difficult to follow, but not so with this book. The second part discusses countries that have managed to attain quasi-recognition of the sign languages. Additional tools will need to be used to bring greater recognition and justification to the sign languages of these countries. The third part addresses how sign language legislation can change from one type to another; for example, some countries have made efforts to achieve official (or explicit) recognition instead of implicit legislative recognition for their sign languages. Finally, the fourth part expresses some contradictions and challenges; the sign languages in these countries may have legal status, but societal attitudes and bias have prevented the full implementation of the sign languages in a given country. In this part, I found the campaigns to have sign languages fully implemented in various countries inspirational.

Concerning how politics works out in some areas of sign language policy, it seems necessary to piggyback the topic of on disability legislation (especially in the United States). The Americans with Disabilities Act serves as a positive example for supporting the provision of sign language interpreting services (without any formal recognition for ASL as a language). I have come to think that the support for ASL is oddly ambiguous in American legislation. Yes, sign language interpreters are a valuable asset to the deaf community, but what about the opportunity for deaf children themselves in learning and mastering ASL? What are their guarantees?

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), as another example, recognizes sign languages in several sections—most notably under Article 9: Accessibility; Article 21: Access to Information; Article 24: Education; and Article 30: Recreation. The United Nations also recognizes September 23 as the International Day of Sign Languages. We, as global citizens, will need to recognize that sign language is a natural language among Deaf community.

Often, hearing people could feel free to choose to study sign language courses in high school or college. Anyone could learn a new language including parents of a Deaf child and community workers that work closely with Deaf people and those hearing people who are signers. The same holds true for many hearing children of deaf parents. These people do not fit in the disability framework. Hearing signers are important into deaf people's lives.

As *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages* shows, it is time to turn the discussion from Deaf under the category of a disability to sign language users as a diverse population and work toward each country having explicit recognition of their sign languages. We need that list to grow.