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# Interview with Dr. Myriam Vermeerbergen: Flemish Sign Language

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## Abstract

Myriam Vermeerbergen is one of the newest researchers and educators to join the Editorial Board of the *IJIE*. Professor Vermeerbergen is the chair of the Flemish Sign Language group at KU Leuven, Arts Faculty, Campus Antwerp, and the coordinator of the Master in Interpreting programme. She is also a Research Associate with the Department of Dutch and Afrikaans, Stellenbosch University. In the early 1990s she pioneered sign language research in Flanders, Belgium, and in 1996 obtained a PhD with a dissertation on morphosyntactic aspects of Flemish Sign Language (VGT). From 1997 until 2007 she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, continuing her work on the grammar of VGT and studying the similarities between the grammars of different signed languages and between signed languages and other forms of gestural communication. In 2007, Myriam was funded to spend several months in South Africa initiating research on home sign. Dr. Vermeerbergen shares insights while describing her journey as a signed language researcher and now the Coordinator of the interpreting programme. This interview took place while she was attending the International Symposium on Translation and Interpreting at Gallaudet University.

Keywords: Signed interpreter education, linguistics, Flemish Sign Language

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## Interview with Dr. Myriam Vermeerbergen

*Debra: Let's start by telling our readers about your journey to become an interpreter educator and researcher in Belgium.*

Myriam: I am from the northern part of Belgium, which has Dutch as its spoken language and the signed language is called Vlaamse Gebarentaal (VGT, or Flemish Sign Language), which was the name the Flemish deaf community decided upon in 2000. During the mid 1980s I studied Germanic languages at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Prof. Dr. Sera De Vriendt was one of the inspiring professors I had at the time—he was more into general linguistics and I found that linguistics was more my passion than literature, although I had started off by studying Germanic languages because of an interest in Dutch and English literature. When it came time to write my master's thesis I approached him to become my supervisor. I wanted to explore a topic that had not been done before, and I also wanted to work with real data. He had several suggestions, and one of the topics he suggested was “deaf people and communication,” which intrigued me. I didn't know any deaf people other than a nephew of a friend of a friend.

To me “deaf people and communication” automatically made me think of signed languages, and I started to read. There wasn't a lot available in Flanders at that time but I did manage to get hold of a copy of Klima and Bellugi's early work and of course, Stokoe's book, as well as the work of Christian Cuxac, a French researcher, who has been very important for my work. I decided to keep it very simple as there were very few studies on the grammar of the signed language used in Flanders. I chose to look at the functions of prepositions in Dutch and then analyse how those functions were expressed in the signed language used by Flemish adult signers. I was really naïve—I wrote a letter to all the schools for the deaf as I assumed that was where signed language could be found. I got a letter back from two schools: One said there is no such thing as signed language in Flanders; it is there in America, but not in Flanders! The other school said that it was an oral school and that for children who could not use spoken language, they would use signs, but only to support spoken Dutch. They said that if I wanted to videotape a signed language I would not find it in the deaf schools. So then I wrote to the Flemish Deaf Association, Fevlado, which at that time was officially promoting “Nederlands met Gebaren”, literally “Dutch with Signs” or Signed Dutch. They were not keen to work with me if I wanted to study sign language proper. They said I was basically turning the clock back, as they were modern now and no longer using the “primitive form of signing”.

Eventually I found a deaf couple willing to collaborate. I organized a data collection session, for which the couple completed several tasks like describing pictures, discussing what they would do if they won the lottery, and so on. I didn't sign at the time, so then I had to find an interpreter who could help me transcribe the data. I found a trained interpreter who was willing to help but when we started to look at the recordings, she said, “Oh, but that's not signed language!” She was trained in Signed Dutch, Nederlands met Gebaren, and not in what she called “*Deaf language*”. So I went back to the deaf couple I had on tape, explaining my experiences with the interpreter, writing back and forth with them, and they recommended involving a hard of hearing friend who was fluent in Flemish Sign Language and had good Dutch, who could help me access the data.

So to cut a long story short, the result was good, and my professor recognized the effort that it had taken me, as a person who didn't know sign language, to provide a linguistic description of a part of the language that had barely been documented before based on an analyses of “real data”. He suggested I continue to do research and to apply for a 4-year PhD scholarship. This allowed me to conduct the first study of Flemish Sign Language grammar based on a corpus of data produced by adult signers. Filip Loncke was the first to look at “signs” and “signing” in Flanders (see Loncke 1990), but he mainly concentrated on phonology, so on individual signs and on deaf childrens' signs and signing. My study was the first larger-scale project that looked at how deaf adults used the language in Flanders. After obtaining the PhD, I did postdoctoral research, continuing work on the grammar of Flemish Sign Language, but I also became interested in cross-linguistic work, comparing Flemish Sign Language to other signed languages. I was particularly interested in how signed languages that were not related could be so similar in certain aspects of their grammar. That took me to South Africa, and there I became interested in home signing. However in 2007, my postdoc research funding opportunities with the Flemish Research Foundation ended. At that time, there was no academic program related to sign language in Flanders; the only course related to VGT was at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel where I was based, and it only was a three-credit “Introduction to Flemish Sign Language” elective course.

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So it seemed that there were no opportunities for me in Flanders to continue my research; I was faced with either moving abroad, or something else. Several years before that I and my colleague Mieke Van Herreweghe had visited several institutions that trained interpreters to see if they were open to training Flemish Sign Language interpreters in their program, but at the time we weren't successful. So in 2007 we decided to give it one more go, returning to the institution that had been the most positive about the idea, Lessius University College. The head of the department, Prof. Dr. Frieda Steurs, liked the idea, and the board of the college decided that in 2008–2009 they would introduce Flemish Sign Language into their programs. And I was hired to do that, together with one deaf colleague. Our department offers a three-year bachelor program of Applied Language Studies, in which students study three languages: Dutch as their mother tongue; a second language to be chosen from French, German or English, which students have already had in secondary school, and a third “exotic” language such as Italian, Spanish, Russian, or Arabic. In 2008 Flemish Sign Language became another option.

We also offer four master's programs, including a master's in interpretation, and several postgrad programs. Because of the Bologna Process<sup>1</sup> and changes to education in Europe, Lessius was integrated into KU Leuven, and we became part of the university's Arts Faculty. So our programs now are academic programs, meaning we offer the first academic Flemish Sign Language interpreting training in Flanders.

*Debra: Have you been a signed language interpreter as well as a researcher?*

Myriam: I was never trained as a signed language interpreter, but in the past, I did do some sign language interpreting. This was at a time when there still were no interpreters trained to work to and from Flemish Sign Language because programs offered Signed Dutch. There were also very few interpreters who could go between English and Flemish Sign Language, and so I was also sometimes asked to do that. In the second half of the 1990s the Flemish Deaf Association had a new board that rejected Signed Dutch in favour of Flemish Sign Language, and we began collaborating. Probably the most important outcome of that change in attitude was that in 2006 Flemish Sign Language was officially recognized by the Flemish Parliament as the language of the Flemish Deaf community. I like to believe my research played a minor role in that.

In 2008 we integrated Flemish Sign Language into the first year of the bachelor's in Applied Language Studies, which meant that three years later we had to start training sign language interpreters in the Master in Interpreting program. As said, I had some practice, but limited, working as an interpreter, but I didn't know much about how to train signed language interpreters. Fortunately, this was the time when the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) was working towards a model curriculum for SLI training. I already knew several colleagues involved in efsli, like Lorraine Leeson and Beppe van den Bogaerde, who encouraged me to be part of it all. Interestingly, many signed language interpreter trainers are often trained as (sign) linguists, and they combine sign linguistics with being professional signed language interpreters and/or training sign language interpreters. So people like Lorraine, Barbara Shaffer, Terry Janzen, Adam Schembri, to name just a few— they are all signed-language linguists and also trained as interpreters. Colleagues were most generous with their knowledge and I learned a lot from the efsli meetings. I remember asking very naïve questions, like why do you start with consecutive interpreting when the market mostly demands simultaneous interpreting? I also attended the classes of colleagues in my department who teach spoken language interpreters, and I combined learning and reading in order to shape our 2011–2012 program, when we had our very first signed language interpreting student in the master's in interpreting program. I taught with a deaf colleague, Carolien Doggen, who has now graduated from EUMASLI<sup>2</sup>. This was another challenge—we didn't have any training in Flanders for Flemish Sign Language

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications.

<sup>2</sup> EUMASLI is an International master study programme that is intended to contribute to the development of the professional field of interpreting between deaf and hearing people in Europe. The master programme is collaboration between Heriot-Watt University (Scotland), Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences (Germany) and Humak University of Applied Sciences (Finland).

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teachers, but fortunately both of my deaf colleagues were and are eager to learn. My other deaf colleague is now studying in one of the part-time sign language interpreter programs.

As time went along we quickly realized that 4 years training wasn't enough, so we now have a postgrad program, a 5th year focused on simultaneous interpreting and an internship. Because our students train both as interpreters between Dutch and a second spoken language (e.g. English), and between Dutch and Flemish Sign Language, it's not easy to arrange placements, and on top of that they have to write their master thesis. So the fifth year part-time program is structured with two mornings of instruction from professional sign language interpreters in the first semester, and a placement with an assigned mentor, as well as work with a variety of interpreters, in the second semester. One of our teachers in the postgraduate program is Isabelle Heyerick, who is secretary of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and a PhD student with us.

*Deb: How many students do you take into the program?*

Myriam: Each year we admit new students, and we usually have around 15 students in the Bachelor 1 who select Flemish Sign Language as their third language. Students come with zero knowledge of Flemish Sign Language. Because Flemish Sign Language is not offered in secondary schools, we cannot require a certain level of proficiency. That is why it's a challenge for a 4-year program, and it resulted in us adding more hours of teaching for sign language acquisition and interpreter training. The number of credits are identical for those studying Spanish, for example, and those studying Flemish Sign Language, however our students have more teaching contact hours and it's still not enough. In Bachelor 3 we also have ERASMUS<sup>3</sup> exchanges, and while a student studying Spanish can go to Spain and improve their Spanish, our students may also travel to a foreign country, like Ireland and study with Lorraine Leeson and her team, which is great, but it doesn't improve their Flemish Sign Language skills. Fortunately, my deaf colleague organizes distance learning for our students who are abroad, so that they can keep up their sign language skills.

*Deb: Anything you wish you could change about your program?*

Myriam: One thing that is difficult in Flanders today is to engage deaf teachers to teach in academic programs. Also it's very difficult for deaf students to be in our program because of the requirement that they study a second spoken language. This is something that we might try and change, offering an opportunity to only study Dutch and Flemish Signed Language. We also need formal training for Flemish Sign Language teachers.

*Deb: You have had a role in several research projects as well as managing this program, like Justisigns. Can you comment on the significance of some of your research?*

Myriam: I am still in love with signed language linguistics and Flemish Sign Language remains underdescribed and underdocumented, so I want to continue to contribute to that body of literature. I am not actively engaged in my own individual research projects on sign language interpreting but I do supervise both master's and PhD students who are exploring topics of importance, like Isabelle Heyerick, who is looking at linguistic interpreting strategies. I also am involved in European projects with colleagues, and I learn a lot from those experiences. We were involved with the Justisigns project, the Signall 3 project, and we are currently a partner in the SignTeach project, developing materials that can support deaf sign language teachers. One project a master's student is working on right now is examining what deaf children think and feel about sign language interpreters—it's really fascinating.

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<sup>3</sup> European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. ERASMUS was established in 1987 by the European Community.

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*Debra: Given that we are at this international conference, let's talk about things that you think our international community needs to address in sign language interpreting. What gaps do you see?*

Myriam: I think one gap is a further exploration of the relationship between simultaneous and consecutive interpreting and how this impacts our teaching. What I mean is that today we often teach consecutive interpreting first and simultaneous after, and consecutive is sometimes seen as some kind of stepping-stone towards simultaneous interpreting—but I think more research and thinking is needed about this approach. And, especially for Flemish Sign Language and other signed languages, we need better documentation of the languages so that we can train interpreters more effectively.

*Debra: What are you taking away from the conference?*

Myriam: Some of the work presented here I am familiar with but there is also a lot of work that is new to me. This is also giving me ideas for future master's or PhD student work, and it is very inspiring to be here. I enjoyed Beppie's keynote very much, as we have had a similar evolution with regard to research, evolving from a program in a university college to being integrated into a university. I also appreciated Dr. Xiao's presentation on interpreting on television in China, as I am not very happy with the approach we have in our country.

I think many signed languages are currently going through a phase of rapid transition because of how the language is being used and who is using it. Think, for example, about the impact of cochlear implementation and mainstream education. Also, until recently signed languages were used by people to communicate when in the same place at the same time, so they were strictly face-to-face languages, but that is no longer the case. Today people can record themselves for someone else to see their message at a later stage when they are not there. I think this might impact on the structure of signed languages. This is very challenging for those of us who train sign language interpreters because there is going to be this whole new generation of younger deaf people who will be using the language in a different way, or might use a different form, and our interpreters have to keep up. So we are back to the need of documenting the language and the evolution of the language, and that description and research needs to feed into our teaching—and how do we do this with so few researchers in this area and only 24 hours in the day?!

*Debra: Thank you for your time. It has been a pleasure talking with you.*

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