

The first national Dutch Sign Language (NGT) Dictionary in book form: Van Dale Basiswoordenboek Nederlandse Gebarentaal.

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In October 2009 the first national Dutch sign language (NGT) dictionary in book form was published by Van Dale publishers (Schermer, Koolhof (eds) 2009). The content of the book is produced by the national Centre for Dutch Sign Language and sign language lexicography, Nederlands Gebarententrum (Dutch Sign Centre) and is based on 25 years of research into the lexicon of Dutch Sign Language (NGT).

In order to understand the relevance of this book for the Dutch Deaf Community and the status of NGT we will first give you short historical overview thus addressing the reason for making a two dimensional book for a visual language in addition to the already existing NGT multimedia dictionaries on dvd-rom and online.

Subsequently we will provide a summary of the research on the NGT lexicon which is the basis for the data in the Van Dale dictionary, including the standardisation process of NGT. Finally we will discuss some examples from the dictionary and show the link to the on line dictionary.

The recognition of a language as a full fledged language has been a major issue since the early days of sign language research. The status of a sign language depends on the status of the deaf community, the historic background and the role a sign language plays within deaf education. The history of sign language research is very closely connected to the history of deaf education and the perspectives on deafness and deaf people. Deafness has been viewed as a deficit for centuries. This, often medical, perspective focuses on the fact that deaf people cannot hear well. From this perspective deaf people have a problem that needs to be cured as quickly as possible in order to integrate properly and fully in the hearing society. This perspective on

deafness has had and still has tremendous impact on the lives of generations of deaf people through out the world

The status of sign languages in Western societies varies throughout history. In some periods sign languages were used in some form in deaf education (in the 18th century for example in Paris), at other times sign languages were banned from deaf education altogether (from 1880–1980 in most Western societies) as is illustrated in the next slide:

Sign language research and more specifically sign language lexicography is a fairly young field. Since the discovery by the American linguist William Stokoe in 1960 of the fact that a sign can be analyzed into five parameters (handshape, movement, location, orientation and non-manual features) linguists in various countries started to conduct research on their national sign languages to establish these languages as the natural language of native deaf signers.

Another perspective on deafness and deaf people has been around since 1965 which can be formulated as follows: if sign languages are natural languages, then its users belong to a linguistic minority. Deaf people are not hearing people with a deficit, they are people who are different from hearing people.

Sign language research in most countries in the second half of the last century has been strongly influenced by this latter perspective on deafness and cannot be separated from the emancipation movement of the Deaf community. Sign languages have been ignored and therefore underestimated for their potential for a very long time. In those areas where deaf people are not allowed to use their own natural language in all functions of society, their sign language clearly has a minority status which is closely related to the status of its users. However, being a minority does not always automatically generate a minority status with respect to sign language. The status of sign languages depends very much on the legal recognition of these languages especially from the point of view of Deaf communities and Deaf organisations and has been one of the most important issues in various countries since 1981. Most of the activities have occurred around the theme of sign language recognition and bilingual education.

The legal status of sign languages is quite diverse around the world. There is no standard way in which such a recognition can be formally or legally extended: every country has its own interpretation. One of the

main reasons for producing the Van Dale Basiswoordenboek NGT in bookform is that a national dictionary in bookform published by a highly regarded publisher gives the national sign language the status and impetus that is needed for its legal recognition process. NGT is one of the few sign languages in the European Union that has not legally been recognised by its government.

NGT lexicon research and language policy (1982-2010)

In the Netherlands research on NGT started in 1982 with a large research project to make an inventory of signs that existed in Dutch Deaf community. In this KOMVA-project 15.000 signs were collected on videotape from 100 native Deaf people (age 18-75) from five different regions (around the five schools for the Deaf) based on a wordlist of 2000 words in different contexts. All signs were transcribed into a notation system and compared with each other. This KOMVA project yielded for the first time information about lexical differences both within and between regions and indicated that no grammatical differences existed between the five regions.

Between 1982 and 1999 our language policy was to produce dictionaries and educational materials such as sign language courses that reflected regional variation. The first national dictionary came out in 1988 and contained 600 signs for parents of young deaf children (Schermer, Harder, Bos 1988). The dictionary was very simple: the illustration of the sign was provided with a translation into written Dutch. The dictionary could be organised alphabetically according to the Dutch translations of the signs, or it could be organised according to the handshape (s) of the sign. It was also indicated in which regions this sign was used. The signs that were used in all regions were called 'preference signs'.

In 1999 the language policy changed: there was a strong pressure from hearing parents and teachers of deaf children to standardize part of the NGT lexicon. Main reason for this was that the educational policy in schools for the Deaf had changed dramatically: after a hundred years of oralism (the use of signs or sign language in schools was forbidden between 1880 and 1980), signs were allowed in Deaf education. The Dutch Department for Education, Culture and Science together with the Dutch Deaf Council and the five organizations for deaf education commissioned a large project to standardize the basic lexicon of NGT. This project, Standardisation of Basic and Educational lexicon (STABOL) was carried out by the Dutch Sign Centre between 1999 and

2002. In total 5000 signs were standardized, using the results from our previous lexicon research (Schermer, 2004). The STABOL project was required by the Dutch government as a prerequisite for legal recognition of NGT.

The standardisation of the NGT basic lexicon was a very controversial issue among many people in the Netherlands. As far as the Dutch government was concerned it was not negotiable: without a standard lexicon there could be no legal recognition of NGT. The idea of standardisation has met with strong opposition in the Deaf community and from researchers in the Netherlands at that time. The concept of standardisation was probably also difficult for the Deaf community to accept since it was not so long ago that their language was forbidden by hearing people. And again hearing people were now enforcing some form of standardisation. There was also an economic argument for standardising part of the lexicon: the development of NGT materials in different regional variants was expensive. Moreover, hearing parents and teachers were not inclined to learn different regional variants. The schools for the Deaf were also in favour of national NGT materials which could be used in NGT tests to monitor the linguistic development of the students and to set a national standard.

The STABOL project was carried out by a group of linguists, native deaf signers (mostly deaf teachers) and native hearing signers in close cooperation with the Deaf community and coordinated by the Dutch Sign Centre. A network of Deaf signers from different regions was established. This network in turn maintained contacts with larger groups of Deaf people whose comments and ideas were shared with the project group which made all of the final decisions. Within the project a standard sign was defined as:

A sign that will be used nationally in schools and pre-school programs for deaf children and their parents. It does not mean that other variants are no longer 'proper signs' the Deaf community can no longer use. This approach turned out to be a crucial factor in the acceptance of the notion of standard signs by the Deaf community (Schermer 2004).

Within the STABOL project 2500 basic signs and 2500 educational signs were standardised.

In principle the signs that were nationally the same (preference signs) that were chosen for previous sign language dictionaries were accepted as standard signs.

The educational lexicon (lexicon that is used in the schools and for school subjects) consists mostly of national signs and new signs. Because NGT has not been used in all domains there are no signs for a great number of concepts. The NGT lexicon has been expanded systematically in the last four years.

Distribution of the signs

In 2006 the online dictionary of NGT standard signs was introduced. Between 2006 and 2009 the Dutch Sign Centre produced several multimedia dictionaries, in total 12.000 signs are now available online and on DVD-ROMs. In THE SLIDE the distribution of the signs is shown: 25 % of the standard signs have been standardised within the STABOL project, 42% of the signs are existing national signs (no regional variation) and 33% is new lexicon (no regional variation, mostly signs that are used in health and justice and for school subjects).

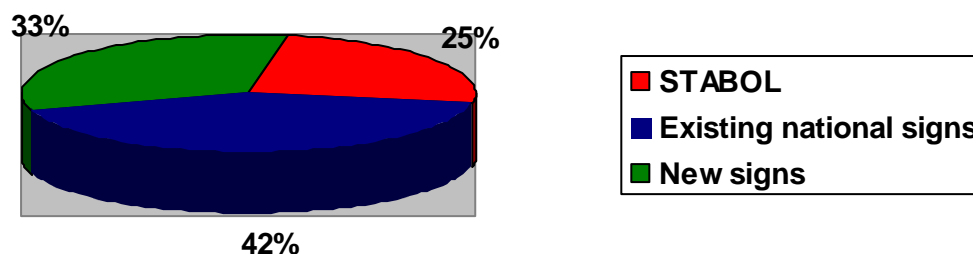


Fig.1: Distribution of signs in NGT standard sign language dictionaries

The 2500 signs that were standardised in the STABOL project can be characterised as follows.

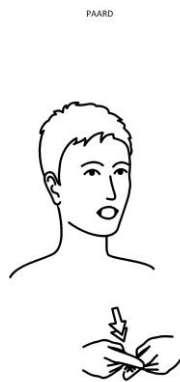
- 60% of the signs are national signs: recognised by all regions and/ or used with the same meaning, no regional variation;
- 25% of the signs: regional signs that have been included in the standard lexicon;
- 15 % of the signs: a selection was made for a standard sign.

In the STABOL project regional variation was included in the standard lexicon in various ways. Regional variation is included in the standard lexicon as a synonym: for example the signs FRIEND and PARENTS. A great number of synonyms were added to the lexicon in this manner. Apart from synonyms, regional variation is included through refining the meaning of a sign. For example the signs HORSE and HORSEBACKRIDING.

The sign HORSE in the region Amsterdam was used for both horse and horsebackriding. In the region Groningen the sign HORSE was only used for horse and not for horsebackriding. In the standardisation process the Groningen sign became the standard sign HORSE and the Amsterdam sign became the standard sign for HORSEBACKRIDING. So both regional variants were included.

Tab.2: Regional variation through refining the meaning

a.



HORSE

b.



HORSEBACKRIDING

In the STABOL project for only a few hundred signs out of the 2500 signs an explicit choice was made between regional variants based on linguistic criteria as mentioned earlier in this paper. Naturally, the establishment of a standard sign alone is not sufficient for the implementation and acceptance of a lexicon. The implementation of the NGT standard lexicon is coordinated by the Dutch Sign Centre and involves several activities, some of which are ongoing.

A major tool in the development and the dispersion of standard and new lexicon is a national database and an online dictionary all coordinated by

the Dutch Sign Centre. The database contains presently more than 15.000 signs including context and grammatical information and regional variants In the Netherlands. This database has provided the data for the compilation of the Van Dale dictionary. A major tool in the development and the dispersion of new lexicon is a national database and an online dictionary all coordinated by the Dutch Sign Centre. The database contains presently 15.000 signs including context and grammatical information and regional variants In the Netherlands. This database has provided the data for the compilation of the Van Dale dictionary.

Type of dictionary

Spoken language dictionaries are mostly either monolingual or bilingual dictionaries. This is not the case for sign language dictionaries.

Monolingual sign language dictionaries hardly exist. The most well known dictionary that might be viewed as monolingual was produced by William Stokoe et al describing American Sign Language (ASL) in a notationsystem (Stokoe, Casterline, Cronenberg, 1965). With multimedia technologies these dictionaries will perhaps be more common in future. However, most sign language dictionaries are produced for hearing learners and therefore mostly bilingual. These dictionaries are organised either by parameters of a sign (handshape, location, movement) using the sign as lemma or more often alphabetically using a glos as lemma. A glos is defined as the translation of the sign in written language which comes closest to the meaning of the sign. For example in NGT the sign AANWEZIG ('to be present').

type of lexicon

One important aspect of the sign language vocabulary is the difference between the *frozen* and *productive* lexicon. As Brennan (1992) pointed out, learners of a sign language often wonder why they find it so difficult to understand real life sign language conversations even if they know hundreds of individual signs. The reason for this is that learners have been introduced to only one kind of vocabulary which is sometimes called the frozen or established lexicon. These signs exist and are usually found in dictionaries. There is however another major category of sign language vocabulary which Brennan called the *productive* or *do-it-yourself* lexicon which is hard to capture in a dictionary. The signer creates signs as they are needed and in doing so may produce combinations which have never actually be used before, but are fully understandable and meaningful in context (Brennan, 1992). An example in NGT is the difference between the frozen sign RIJDEN in een auto (to drive a car) and the productive sign RIJDEN in een auto, hortend en

stotend (driving a car on a bumpy road). As opposed to the first sign, the second one is not included in the dictionary.

Which signs?

Sign Language dictionaries deal with variation in the language in different ways. Even though the majority of sign lexicographers primarily intends to document and describe the lexicon of a sign language, their choices in this process determine which signs varieties are included and which are not. Therefore inevitably many sign language lexicographers produce a standardizing dictionary of the sign language or at least (mostly unintentionally) nominate one variant to be the preferred one. And even if it is not the intention of a sign language lexicographer, the general public – especially hearing sign language learners- often interprets the information in the dictionary as a prescribed, rather than described vocabulary.

The fact that sign languages lack a written form confronts sign language lexicographers with a problem: what constitutes a lemma, which form of the sign is the correct one, the citation form in the dictionary. Therefore, lexicographers have to determine, one way or the other, whether an item in the language is used by the majority of a given population, or whether it is used by a particular section of the population. Only a few sign language dictionaries have been based on extensive research on language variation (see for example Johnston 1989 for Australian Sign Language (Auslan), Schermer et al. 1988, 2006 for NGT and the Centre for Sign Language and Sign Supported Speech KC 2008 for Danish Sign Language (DSL)).

6. The Van Dale Basiswoordenboek NGT: content and organisation

The dictionary contains 3000 standard signs that belong to the frozen lexicon. These signs are a selection from the signs from the STABOL project and new signs.

The Van Dale Basiswoordenboek NGT is organised alphabetically according to glosses of the signs.

The use of glosses was preferred over the use of a notation system.

A notation system does reflect the sign more adequately, however the average user of this dictionary will not be able to read a complex notation system.

The dictionary is not organized according to the parameters of the sign because in bookform this information would be less userfriendly. In addition to the Van Dale dictionary in bookform an online dictionary is available on our website (Schermer,Koolhof,Muller 2010) which offers both search features: alphabetically and via handshape/location.

Each entry in the Van Dale Basiswoordenboek contains the following:

- a glos
- nonmanual information (oral components, spoken components). The dictionary contains an overview with pictures of all oral components that occur in the dictionary.
- grammatical information, such as type of verb
- example sentences. Because a glos may be only one of the possible translations for the sign, other possible translations are added. For example the sign REALISEREN
- an illustration of the sign. All illustrations have been produced by the Dutch Sign Centre using a computer program.

The online dictionary Van Dale NGT offers sign movies for each sign illustration and translations in NGT for all example sentences in addition to the above mentioned search options.

The following examples illustrate some of solutions for finding the right glosses for the signs. The signs GROOT (big, in general), GROOT persoon (big person, but not tall person which can be the same word in Dutch). GROOT grote objecten (big of big objects) and GROOT kleine voorwerpen/dieren (big of small objects or animals).

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