A Hundred Years of Signed Language Planning

Tommi Jantunen
Finnish Association of the Deaf
Finland

Introduction*

In Finland, the authority which serves to maintain and plan languages is the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus). Currently it guides and plans five languages: Finnish, Finland-Swedish, Saami, Romani and Finnish Sign Language (FinSL). The reason for doing language planning with these particular languages is that they are all officially recognised in the Constitutional Law of Finland.

The expert bodies of language planning are the Language Boards. Of the five boards, the FinSL Board is perhaps the most interesting one: it is, at the moment, perhaps the only language planning body in a world for a sign language founded by an official institute (Savolainen 2000).

One of the main tasks of the FinSL Board is to establish a standard variety of FinSL, the variety used in situations where colloquial signing is not suitable (e.g. in education).

The FinSL Board was founded in 1997, but the idea of standardising FinSL is much older. The first attempts at standardisation were started already in the beginning of the 20th century. This paper deals primarily with these roots of FinSL language planning. It is shown how the early drive to standardise FinSL, together with the desire to create a signed *lingua franca*, led to the 1907 launch of the so-called Nordic Sign Language Project whose aim was to establish a common, standard sign language for Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Although the goal was never realised, this Nordic cooperation resulted in the first FinSL sign language dictionary being published (as well as the first Swedish Sign Language dictionary).

The state of FinSL at the beginning of 20th century

*Oralism* became the dominant philosophy in deaf education in many countries at the end of 19th century. In Finland, the speech method was accepted in 1892, and the deaf schools where FinSL had been used for fifty years were transformed into Finnish and Swedish “speaking and writing” schools.1

The use of FinSL as the language of instruction was allowed only in two schools: in the Jyväskylä school which was a school for the deaf who had a Finnish background, and in the Pietarsaari school for the deaf who had a Swedish background (KML 1946/9).2

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1 I am indebted to Randel Wells for commenting and revising (most of) the text.

2 Finland was a part of Sweden until 1809. Due to the long Swedish administration, the Swedish language enjoyed high status in 19th century Finland; today Finland is officially a bilingual country where the majority of the hearing people speak Finnish and a minority (about 6 %) speak Swedish.

3 The division of deaf schools into ones using only Finnish or Swedish have had far reaching effects on FinSL. Today it consists of two distinct varieties: one variety – the dominant vari-
Because of oralism, skilled deaf teachers were replaced by incompetent hearing ones, and the broader educational goals were sacrificed to the sole objective of teaching speech. Even at the schools where signing was still allowed, the quality of teaching varied greatly because teachers followed their own, and in my opinion often misguided instruction strategies.

Eventually the chaos oralism brought into the Finnish deaf education begun to affect FinSL, too: it started to lose its uniformity. A concrete sign of this was the fact that the pupils who had attended the two schools where the use of FinSL was still allowed did not completely understand each other anymore. Julius Hirn, the hearing president of the Finnish Association of the Deaf, characterised the situation in 1907 in the following way:

“[In Finland] we do not have a norm school with teaching in sign language. Instead we have, in addition to speech schools, two institutes for over-aged deafmutes where different signs are used, according to teachers free will. The result is that the pupils from one institute have difficulties in understanding the pupils from the other institute.” (J. Hirn 1909: 69; my translation.)

The disunification of FinSL, and the more general drop in its status, caused the deaf and hearing sign language advocates to take actions, and so the question of how to reunify, or standardise, FinSL became the burning topic of many deaf congresses and meetings. It was debated, for example, at the third general Finnish deaf congress in 1905, as well as at the second general meeting of teachers of the Finnish deaf schools, organised a year later (TD 1905/86,87,88; 1906/7,8).

Several reasons were put forward as to why FinSL should be standardised:

- A standard language would give people a common set of semantic signs to communicate.
- A standard would raise the status of the language.
- Standardisation together with the expansion of lexicon would enrich the language.

In general, the standardisation was seen both as a counter strategy against oralism and as a help to bring the community back together. Also, it was thought that standardisation would give the language more credibility which would, again, enhance the possibilities of the deaf to use their own language in the society.

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3 These communicational difficulties mark the beginning of the division of FinSL into the two current varieties (see fn. 2).
4 Concrete initiatives to raise the status of FinSL were also started: sign language courses for the hearing were arranged, and a kindergarten for deaf children was founded. Julius Hirn also campaigned for a school where FinSL could be used but, unfortunately, his attempts did not bear fruit (TD 1906/7,8).
The Nordic Sign Language Project

The oralistic turn in the Finnish deaf education, and the consequent unstandardisation of FinSL became important underlying factors in the endeavour called the Nordic Sign Language Project. In fact, the whole project can be seen as a direct continuation to the early attempts made at standardising FinSL.

The Nordic Sign Language Project was launched at the first Nordic Deaf Congress in Copenhagen in 1907, and its immediate goal was to unify the sign languages used in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The initiator of the project was the president of the Finnish Association of the Deaf, Julius Hirn, who at the congress delivered a speech titled “Should not something be done in order to establish a common sign language for Finland and the other Nordic countries?” (J. Hirn 1909; my translation). In a nutshell the speech was a plea for a standard language which could, for instance, be used in deaf education in the whole of Scandinavia.5

The speech concluded with a detailed proposal according to which the Nordic standard could be achieved. The attempt was supposed to follow three steps:

- Firstly, the deaf in each Scandinavian country should gather and graphically file as many national signs as possible. Each sign should be in general use within the community. To ensure this, the signs should be approved by as many deaf persons as possible.
- Secondly, a committee consisting of representatives from each country would choose the best of all the collected signs. The chosen signs would form the basis of the new common language.
- Thirdly, in order to make the new language accessible for all, a graphic dictionary of it would be published.

The proposal for the Nordic sign language lingua franca was positively received. It was decided that the suggested committee would be set up to take care of the further preparations. Danish Reverend J. Jørgensen, who at the congress had already presented his photographed collection of 280 Danish signs (see Jørgensen 1907), was elected as chairman of this Nordic committee.

The first Finnish and Swedish sign language dictionaries

The Finnish representatives in the Nordic committee were Julius Hirn, his deaf father David Fredrik (“Fritz”) Hirn who was a former teacher, and Mr. Vesenterä (KML 1907/10). Of these three, the most eager to carry out Finland’s part in the Project was Fritz. Together with his wife Maria, he soon managed to photograph some 400 - 450 Finnish signs which were sent to

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5 In addition to the standardisation aspect, Hirn’s speech in Copenhagen included many other aspects, such as development. He thought, for instance, that signs were semantically too loaded and their meanings should be specified. This specification would reduce the need to use long explanations which would, again, eventually improve the status of signing in the eyes of the deaf and their hearing teachers by showing that signs could express the same fine nuances as words in spoken language. In general, the development method he pursued was quite modern. For example, in situations where there were two or more equally good ways to express something, he did not want to choose one and discard the other(s). Today the FinSL board follows this same principle (c.f. Savolainen 2000).
Denmark to Reverend Jørgensen at the end of 1908 (c.f. TD 1908/10 and D. F. Hirn 1910).  

While waiting for the other countries to complete their duties, Fritz Hirn felt that he should continue the valuable work he had done in filing the Finnish signs. As a former teacher he was burdened by the low status of FinSL in deaf education, and even among the deaf themselves. To help remedy this social problem, he decided to start to compile his own signed language "textbook". Being a excellent signer himself, he was well qualified for this work. He had, in fact, acquired his language directly from Carl Oscar Malm, who was the deaf founder of the Finnish deaf education in the middle of 19th century (for more information on Malm’s role in the birth of Finnish Deaf Community and FinSL see e.g. Hoyer & Jantunen 2000).  

Fritz Hirn’s adamant conviction and hard work finally resulted in the first graphic FinSL dictionary. This dictionary, The Deafmutes Sign Language in Finland, was published in three booklets between the years 1910 – 1916.  

The dictionary was originally planned to contain roughly 1,000 sign photographs. However, the plans changed abruptly when Fritz Hirn died in December 1910, just after the publication of the first booklet. The two remaining booklets were posthumously edited by Fritz’s son Julius, but when he died in 1914, the number of photographs was fixed to 344. Even the promised alphabetical index mentioned in the foreword had to be dropped.  

Finland was not the only country which published a dictionary for its national sign language. While waiting for the Nordic committee to continue its work, a dictionary was also published in Sweden. This dictionary, called simply Sign Language, was compiled - like the Finnish one – by a deaf man, Oskar Österberg (1916).  

Linguistically, Österberg's dictionary is unique: in addition to the proper dictionary part it also contains a wide grammar describing old Swedish Sign Language (SSL). In the grammar, Österberg thoroughly analyses the structure of SSL. For example, he divides the signs of SSL into two classes: lexicalised frozen signs and free signs, which imitate the form or some other characteristics of an object. This division resembles with amazing accuracy the modern division of the signed language lexicon into frozen and polysynthetic sign (i.e. classifier predicates) used, for example, by Lars Wallin (1996).  

**On the goals and ideological foundation of the project**  

Julius Hirn's immediate goal was to unify the four Nordic sign languages and establish a standard which could, for instance, be used in deaf education in the whole of Scandinavia. However, judging from his speech in Copenhagen, this was not his ultimate goal: in the speech he mentioned on several occasions that the Nordic sign language would only be an intermediate stage in an attempt to establish an international sign language.  

Julius Hirn had, in fact, declared his dream of the international sign language already at the international deaf congress in Paris in 1900. This language would be composed of signs from different languages from around the world and would be understood by all deaf and their hearing friends. Eventually it could even evolve into a global **lingua franca**, a language common to all the people.

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6 Both Fritz and Maria Hirn were, for their time, distinguished professional photographers. For more information, see Naukkarinen (1996).
Julius Hirn considered signed language to be especially well suited to function as a world language. According to him, this was mainly due to the iconic character of signs which made them – at least to the trained eye – easily comprehensible. He based this argument on the fact that when deaf from different countries meet, they tend to learn quite quickly to understand each other’s signing.

In fact, Julius Hirn even thought that sign languages of different countries were all genetically related (c.f. Baynton 1996). This belief adds an interesting ideological twist to the whole Nordic Sign Language Project: the project was not to establish a standard by unifying independent languages, but rather dialects of one and the same language. Against this background the attempt actually seems to resemble the standardisation of written Finnish which was moulded from several dialects during the 19th century.

**In conclusion**

Eventually the Nordic Sign Language Project never did come true the way Julius Hirn had planned. Both father and son Hirn died in the first decade of the 20th century and with them went a great deal of the Finnish momentum that had pushed the project forward. Also, Nordic co-operation was further complicated by the first World War and the economical difficulties it caused.

However, the standardisation of Nordic sign languages continued in different forms all the way to the 1980’s. The Nordic committee was re-established in the 1940’s, again with an attempt to establish common signs for Nordic countries. Gradually the scope of this work shifted away from standardisation and focused on expanding the lexicon (to create signs for specific subjects/topics) (see Jantunen 2001).

Much of what was being done then is now being carried out in Finland by the FinSL Board. Today, when new things come to society the FinSL Board makes recommendations for standardised form of signs (e.g. Europe’s new currency, the Euro).

The fundamental goal of the Nordic Sign Language Project agrees quite accurately with that of today’s FinSL Board: to establish a standard signing variety which could be used, for example, in education (c.f. Savolainen 2000). The project shared some other characteristics with FinSL Board, too:

- The desire to bring the community closer together;
- The desire to preserve the language;
- The desire to establish a lexical core of signs.

To conclude: the Nordic Sign Language Project can be seen as one of the first – or perhaps even the first – language planning attempts in the world focused on signed language.
References


KML = Kuuromykkäin lehti. Helsinki.


TD = Tidskrift för dövstumma. Helsingfors.
