

Sign languages in the EU

European Languages Day on 26 September is devoted to the variety of languages spoken by EU citizens. However, not all people can speak, or hear others speaking. Some use sign languages, which policy-makers consider in the context of the rights of people with disabilities, or as a linguistic minority right. The United Nations has launched International Day of Sign Languages, to be celebrated for the first time on 23 September 2018.

Sign languages and their users

Sign languages (SL) are not modelled on spoken languages, yet are languages in their own right, with equally complex rules, grammatical structures and vocabulary that evolve and vary by region, social and age groups; convey meanings and emotions; create social and family bonds; and meet artistic and identity needs.

Varieties

There is no universal SL, and the EU has a large variety of SLs, including a French SL in France, (a different) French and Flemish SLs in [Belgium](#), as well as, for example, Catalan and Galician ones besides the Spanish SL in Spain. The United Kingdom, the United States and Ireland do not use the same SL; Ireland uses its indigenous SL, while the US SL, having been introduced by the French, has a lot in common with the French SL. Nevertheless, there is an international system called the International Sign, a sort of lingua franca used at international conferences and meetings where participants do not share a common SL. It does not have a fixed grammar or vocabulary and relies heavily on gestures and context.

The users

One in a thousand persons in the EU (approximately [half a million](#) deaf or hard-of-hearing persons) communicates in one of [31 national or regional sign language](#) as their first language. SLs have many more users, since people without hearing problems use them to communicate with deaf family members or friends.

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Interpretation into and between SLs is necessary in communication between deaf and hard-of-hearing persons and other communities, or among themselves. Debates in the European Parliament are rendered in sign language for those Members who need it. Since the [ratio](#) of sign language users to interpreters varies among Member States, as does the quality of interpretation, in 2016 the EP adopted a [resolution](#) on professional SL interpreters, and [backed](#) the introduction of international sign language interpretation for all plenary debates.

The Erasmus+ programme has supported [training sessions](#) on SL interpreting and a course in [quality in educational interpreting](#), co-organised by the [European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters](#). An [Insign](#) pilot project, 'Real-Time Sign Language Application and Service' (on communication between the deaf or hard-of-hearing and the EU institutions, funded by the Commission), and a research [SignSpeak project](#) have investigated the potential of ICT in providing real-time interpretation into sign languages.

A [study](#) for the Scientific Foresight Unit of EPRS – 'Language equality in the digital era. Human Language Project' – analysed language technologies applied to human languages and their contribution to language teaching, learning, translation and interpretation. It identified the lack of multilingual data on sign language as a significant barrier for researchers in sign language technologies and for progress in this area.

In September 2018, in a recital to an own initiative [resolution](#), the EP recognised that sign languages, being an element of Europe's linguistic diversity, need to be supported by language technology. ICT solutions could be helpful in providing sign language interpretation. ICT is also seen as a factor for accessibility to audiovisual media services, in a [recital](#) of the [Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#) due to be adopted in plenary in October.

