

IETM REPORT

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# LOUD SILENCES

*Languages, accessibility and cultural hegemony*

Report from the IETM Milan Satellite Meeting, 2-5 May 2019

By Marta Prandelli



FATTORIA  
VITTADINI



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# Introduction

Language can be seen as a political concept, a social compass and a backbone of the cultural democracy debate.

The native vs foreign language barriers nourish the exclusion and inclusion patterns deeply rooted in the global art scene. Sign language is still far from being recognised as an autonomous language and as a cultural expression, which belongs to its territory as much as the “spoken” national languages. The “upper” vs “lower” language dichotomy is still a feature strongly inherent in art communication, more striving day by day. Given this, can one claim that art belongs to everyone and creates spaces for an equal dialogue?

The IETM Satellite in Milan, 2-5 May 2019, was a place to discuss the never-ending renegotiation of what are the linguistic codes of accessing, mastering and owning the arts, and most importantly - who holds the right to define and redefine those. During the meeting, the various barriers that art and culture often adopt, embody and even empower were debated and outlined through multiple points of view. Organised in partnership with [Fattoria Vittadini](#), this encounter was held in parallel with the [Festival del Silenzio](#), an international performing arts venue promoting language and communication access, through supporting Italian Sign Language, Signing Culture and promoting their legal recognition. Happening around the same dates and sharing guests and part of the location, the two events hosted a conversation on how language inclusion should be implemented and showed how equal and real access can truly be ensured in the arts.

As already emphasised during IETM Meeting in Hull, “issues of inclusion, diversity and difference can often become intense, fractured and difficult”. However, the Milan Satellite deepened the



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conversation on inclusion going beyond accessibility, attempting to find honest answers to the questions of power and representation in the arts and the role of language in their formation. During the three days in Milan, language related inaccessibility was acknowledged and processed, and possible tools to overcome it were explored.

All Satellite sessions aimed to be interactive. The simultaneous presence of participants using various spoken and sign languages allowed to show that accessibility is not easy but it is possible. Communication among multiple languages was achievable only thanks to the cooperation of everyone and to the assistance of interpreters and translators, who were the backbone of the meeting and must be recognised and thanked for their amazing work. This meeting would not have been possible without the presence of LIS (Italian Sign Language) and IS (International Sign

Language) interpreters, simultaneous transcribers, Italian-English translators and interpreters of other sign languages who accompanied some of the contributors.

Emma Jayne Park and Rita Sala moderated the meeting using informality and undertaking activities which were aimed at sharing languages, cultures and worlds in the room while preparing the audience to set their mind on the session topics. These activities are collected in this report in the [Task Boxes](#), intended both as memory tools for anyone who was attending the meeting and as quick toolkits for those who are looking for resources to be used in informal educational meetings focused on cultures and languages.

Similarly, the [Historical Boxes](#) are brief informative notes on important events that featured the history of deaf culture and language.

# Opening session

The IETM Satellite Meeting opened under the motto: language is accessibility and accessibility is democracy. Representatives of different institutional, associative and cultural bodies touched upon various topics: from the responsible role of institutions to the spread of bottom-up policies; from the importance of good practices to the recognition of one's own identity; from the hegemonic power relations to the cultural democracy of inclusion and the importance of different role models.

The first day of this Satellite Meeting was divided into three parts. The first one, led by Victor Mayot, aimed at getting to know other participants, pick each other's brains and find synergies to surf on during the rest of the meeting and far beyond. The second part, moderated by Riccardo Olivier, consisted of short interventions by local officials, politicians, and heads of organisations involved in organising the Satellite. And finally, the third part was Rinkoo Barpaga's keynote presentation on language as a social practice, inseparable from its environment, capable of keeping a community together, and at the same time of dividing and segregating some of its parts.

## Contributors

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Rinkoo Barpaga – Artist, Stand Up Comedian, Actor, Film and Theatre Maker, UK

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From left to right: Rita Mazza, Lucia Rebagliati, Donatella Ferrante, Asa Richardsdóttir (speaking), Stefano Bruno Galli, Filippo del Corno, Riccardo Olivier and Rinkoo Barpaga. © Massimiliano Monnecchi

## Who's there?

The introduction by Victor Mayot, IETM Project Manager Meetings, set the informal nature of the entire meeting. The main aim of the event was the enhancement of cooperation and understanding between different cultures, paying specific attention to the barriers set by the mainstream cultures and dominating languages. Victor made clear from the beginning that the compresence of different languages – such as English, Italian, LIS, IS, BSL<sup>1</sup> and more – could represent a precious occasion to change the formats and break the barriers. For this reason, the answer to the “Who's there?” (name of the session) question was explored through getting to know each other informally, despite the language differences: each participant was simply asked to start a conversation with a person next to them.

The opening panel focused on inclusion and took into account several points of view.

Ása Richardsdóttir, freshly appointed Secretary General of IETM, started her new position on March 1st 2019. Recalling the powerful numbers of IETM – founded in 1981, it is the oldest cultural network in Europe, with over 450 members, Ása underlined how the Milan Satellite Meeting is a clear example of what IETM does: giving prominence to those issues where the social and political attention has not been indulging on yet. Ása stressed the importance of the engagement of IETM members and encouraged the participants to use this four-day opportunity to take active part in the meeting, as the network is made by its members. This last point was then picked up by Riccardo, emphasising that Ása's prompting to be active as members of IETM is also a call to be active members of the performing arts sector and of one's own community, aiming at boosting the discourse on language and communication accessibility.

Following the greetings by Stefano Bruno Galli, head of the Regional Office of Autonomy and Culture, on behalf of the Lombardy Region, Filippo del Corno, head of the Milan Office of Culture, talked

about how events like the IETM Meeting are important for their ability to raise public awareness and to trigger a debate accommodating different ideas, opinions, and experiences. He also stressed that these events are of great help to inform politics. In particular, talking about how performing arts can pass beyond the dimensions of spoken expression can allow to see the concept of accessibility not through a paternalistic framework, but as a democracy tool. Ensuring a widest accessibility to communication and to different languages becomes an element of more concrete conception of democracy.

This connection between accessibility, rights and democracy also echoed in the speech by Donatella Ferrante, an executive at the Italian Ministry of Culture. She expressed hopes that the Satellite would help in answering the question: how to overcome the asymmetries, which reveal themselves when it comes to international collaborations? Recognition, one of the central themes of the meeting, also according to Riccardo Olivier, leads institutions to respond to the call for a new and wider horizon of responsibility.

Lucia Rebagliati, President of the Association of Italian Sign Language Interpreters (ANIOS), introduced herself as the representative of the professionals of accessibility. Festival del Silenzio and IETM decided to take on the challenge of shaking the existing communication barriers. Art, culture and performance speak a language

that tries to reach anyone; therefore, with the presence of deaf artists and/or deaf audiences, it should also be open to this particular language, this particular form of communication.

Lucia included in her contribution a brief historical reflection. Italy is the only country in Europe that has not yet recognised its sign language. ANIOS is a professional association that supports the deaf community in this civic battle. Certainly, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [[→ History Box 1](#)] also ratified by Italy, was an important step, but before the laws, before words, comes the civic duty to make culture, politics, the social life accessible.

The situation of non-recognition of LIS in Italy was also featured in the intervention of Rita Mazza, artistic director of Festival del Silenzio. Rita, as a native signer, recalls that thanks to sign language she was able to develop her identity (an experience that also Rinkoo Barpanga shared in his contribution). While her native country, Italy, refuses to recognise her language, Rita's commitment to creating synergy among many different languages, including sign language, met with Fattoria Vittadini's focus on supporting and promoting sign language. With meetings, poetry and performances conveyed by artists from all over Europe, Festival del Silenzio reached its second edition.



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1. British Sign Language

## A Different Strategy

Language as a means of shaping one's identity was also the central theme of Rinkoo Barpaga's contribution. Using his own life story as an example of how language is actually one of the many social practices, Rinkoo traced the prescriptions and proscriptions that sign languages have had and still have. Also, talking about the barriers that languages can raise, Rinkoo – an artist, stand-up comedian, actor, film and theatre-maker – underlined the importance of existence of role models within deaf communities for the next generations. He also spoke about how we often adapt to other people's attitudes and, more broadly, to the dominant culture, which is conveyed and shaped by languages.

### Education. The robot wakes up

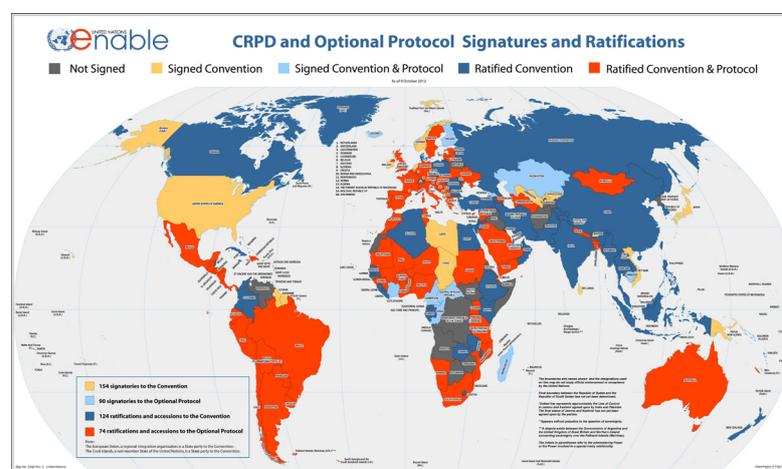
Rinkoo's life story is closely connected to his experience with Sign Language. He was born in Birmingham (UK), profoundly deaf. When he was growing up, the medical system, the educational system, the system, in general, forbade the use of sign language. In 1880, during the Congress in Milan [→ [History Box 2](#)], European and American educated doctors and other professionals decided that sign language had to be banned and deaf children had to use speech.

That decision has had a massive impact on the deaf communities all around the world. For example, because Rinkoo was not allowed to use sign language, he had to learn to speak, an approach that is now known as oralism.

"I will now try to let you understand what oralism was like. So now, you in the front row: you'll be me and I will be your teacher. The repetition of that again and again is what oralism looks like. The child became a robot, I was a robot growing up. And I didn't know anything about sign language."

## HISTORY BOX 1: UN CONVENTION FOR THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a legally binding treaty that was adopted in 2006 and went into force in 2008. The Convention has been so far ratified by 177 countries and, according to the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), "it is the first international treaty ever that recognises sign languages and the linguistic human rights of deaf people". According to CRPD, governments have to recognise sign language as an official language, guarantee interpreter services, and assure deaf people's education in their sign language.



CRPD and Optional Protocol Signatures and Ratification as of September 19th 2017 (Source: [United Nation website](#))



Rinkoo miming an example of oralist teaching approach of the word "nose" by repeating the word "nose" while pointing the body part over and over again. © Massimiliano Monnechi

Rinkoo was sent to a school with an oralist education approach and had to catch a taxi in order to get to school. Different taxi drivers drove him over the years, but a special one made Rinkoo realise that a completely different way of communicating was actually possible. One day, on the way to school, the taxi stopped at a house where a deaf black Jamaican man was using sign language while walking towards the car. The second stop was at another house, where a young man and his mum were communicating via signs. At the third stop, a Rastafarian man with dreadlocks was smoking at the doorstep with his son, a sweet little boy whose name was Jamail. All the three passengers were having hearing aids, the same as Rinkoo's, but when he tried to speak to them, they started signing.

"One day, Jamail tapped me on the shoulder and pointed out of the taxi, and there was a dog walking. He signed "dog" to me and that was the first piece of sign language I ever learned. Suddenly I felt good. My whole life I had been a robot, people said things and all I had to do was copying. I had no emotional connection to what was happening. But when I started using sign language I started to be excited. I started to wake up."

When Rinkoo arrived to school, he said to his teacher that he had learned a new language. She was furious. At that moment, he realised that he was not allowed to use sign language. He had to keep it secret. It could only be used to communicate with friends, but during school hours Rinkoo had to be like a soldier, doing what the teacher told him to do. That was the oppression that deaf people have been experiencing for years.

### *Work experience. Unceasing adaptation*

Finding a job was very difficult for Rinkoo. In the UK, most deaf people are not employed, as they can't find a job. It is partly linked to health and safety issues. According to Rinkoo, the fear of the deaf plays an important role as well. The assumption that deaf people can't do any jobs is a trap for the deaf community. There is a powerful linguistic factor too.

The sign language that Rinkoo was using while growing up was not BSL [British Sign Language], but he wasn't aware of

## HISTORY BOX 2: 1880 MILAN CONGRESS

Commonly known as the Milan Conference, the Second International Congress of Education of the Deaf held in Milan was the first international conference where deaf educators coming from all over the world gathered to discuss teaching methods for deaf people.

During the conference, the educators passed eight resolutions, including one stating that Oral Education (Oralism) had to be used as the main teaching method for deaf people. Also one of the resolutions underlined the importance of discouraging the use of sign language in deaf people's education. Sign language was then banned from schools and also parents were advised to stop using sign language at home. From that moment on and for over 100 years, deaf students in Europe and United States were denied to use sign language in schools, speech therapy being the only teaching method allowed. Although Sign language is now recognised internationally [→ [History Box 1](#)], Oralism or the Oral method still plays a major role in Deaf education all over the world.

## HISTORY BOX 3: DEAF CLUBS

As Rinkoo explained during the question time, before the Milan Congress in 1880, Thomas Braidwood had already founded a school for sign language in the UK. When graduates left Barrier's school, they didn't know where to go next. So the missionaries from the church set up deaf clubs, which were linked to religion. It was mandatory for deaf people to be part of those clubs. Missionaries wanted them to be pious.

Also, using the words of Jessica Bokor: "Deaf Clubs were places where Deaf people could gather together to socialise regularly. Deaf Clubs were deeply ingrained into the Deaf Culture of their time, providing a place where Deaf people could attend performances by Deaf comedians, plays, lectures, film screenings and holiday parties, as well as get caught up on the news of the day and conduct business. There are different clubs based on race, ethnicity, styles of worship, sports and education".

that until he found a job for ITV. During the audition for becoming a camera presenter, Rinkoo was evaluated by two groups of people: business executives and native deaf BSL assessors. He got the job primarily because he was good-looking on camera; the sign language element of the job, however, needed to be polished and refined, according to the BSL monitors.

Rinkoo then realised that he was using "urban sign language" with his friends in Birmingham, which is different from BSL. Why did the urban sign language develop? It was a matter of equality. Deaf people from black and ethnic minorities and immigrants were not welcome in the deaf clubs [→ [History Box 3](#)], because they looked different. People from Handsworth

- Rinkoo's neighborhood - therefore developed a type of sign language that was different from BSL. It was called urban sign language, but in a way it was sort of a secret code.

"From those days of racist discrimination, up till today, we found urban sign language, and it is now part of the mainstream. It is now cool."

Rinkoo worked in different industries, and each had a preferred variety of sign language. "I was tempted to use my own. People in charge were telling me what they wanted and I had to adapt. It has never been a choice I was allowed to make."

## Power and class relations

In a country like the UK, where the class system is well established, urban sign language is seen as the lower class language, especially by deaf people with academic background and those who have attended an oralist school. What is interesting is that the deaf people who are prominent within the deaf community, who are in power positions, use “Sign Supported English” [SSE]. Although it is grammatically poor, there is a belief that culturally it is more valuable. People using this sign language variety are higher in the hierarchy. Similarly, in the United States, there are people who use fluently American Sign Language, but it is considered that English-based variety of sign language is an attribute of a higher position in the social hierarchy. In these circumstances, social recognition remains a challenge.

“If I want to be a rebel and say that my use of my language is correct, it will affect my job and career. How do you make money and live? You have to adapt to the environment that you are in.”

The questions from the audience following Rinkoo’s contribution helped to delve into his perspective on both the importance of role models for new generations and the challenges for in the performing arts in relation to the position of deaf communities.

### Being a role model

Do you go and talk to children in schools in the UK? What is going to be about for the new generation of deaf children?

“Good question. I am concerned about deaf education. When I spoke to deaf children in schools, it came out that there weren’t deaf role models for them, and this is really a shame. Deaf role models are really important, because, if you don’t have role models as a deaf child, you don’t know how to navigate your life. It is a concern for me.”

I have a second question related to that: I am deaf, I went deaf and I had a cochlear implant and I was thinking about going to schools myself. Do you think that I could also be a role model for deaf children?

“Absolutely. It is really important to show the variety of deaf artists we have, all their different skills. We have to present that variety to deaf children like options, different ways, different choices they could make. When I grew up, I didn’t have any role models who were deaf. The first time I ever had a deaf role model I was at the age of 23. I could see how somebody was living, how they were navigating life, how to approach things in the right way. Even how to approach the hearing person in the right way and how to have a conversation with them. There are a lot of big questions that a deaf person needs to answer. And a lot of deaf children never get those answers. You have to think that deaf children are unequal to achieve things in life, but we have to give them encouragement and praise. The deaf community today have lots of mental health issues. Who is going to save them?”

Rinkoo stated that he feels responsibility towards those deaf children he is talking to when presenting his travel experiences in deaf classes. It is about the responsibility to encourage those children to believe that they can achieve a lot, instead of reminding them of the barriers and limitations, depriving them of role models and making them even more confused about their own identity.

### Challenges in the performing arts

What are the changes that you would like to see in the performing arts and the cultural sector? What are the things that we can do to make up for the lost time and start moving in the right direction?

Rinkoo stated that it all starts with open-mindedness, overcoming the assumption that deaf people cannot do certain things and dismantling negative connotations linked to the deaf.

“Look at me, I am fine. I can have a conversation with you, I can talk to you, I can engage with you, I can interact with you, like every other person in this room. We all live together in this world.”

He also spoke about the challenges he is facing when performing.

“As a deaf person, I might get criticised by hearing audiences, I have to think about different strategies to get you to enjoy it: I have to make you laugh but I also have to remember that I have a second purpose which is to educate, make you think. I remember I am unique. I do a one-man show, when I grew up I didn’t see so much of that. I took an experiment and it worked, people bought my tickets, and every show was sold out. I speak of the uniqueness of my performances. When I didn’t want to have an interpreter, I wanted you from the audience to understand me directly, to understand my gestures, my movements and all those things. I don’t want you, an audience member, to come in and think ‘Oh this is a waste of money, I can’t understand any of this’. But I have to use an interpreter to make it possible for you to understand me, we are still not equal in that sense compared to hearing people. One of the things that are happening in the art world within Britain, is that we have captions and sign language interpreters on the side of the stage. We also have what we call integrated interpreters, who move around on stage with actors. I am not fully on board with that. I remember a production where there were some deaf actors on stage, there were some hearing actors on stage, it was all mixed. It looked nice, but all of the main characters were hearing. We don’t see in Britain deaf people leading performances. We don’t see deaf people engaging in the dialogue with the hearing person on an equal footing. You have to think about how to change your productions, your performances in a way deaf people can access them and understand them. Having interpreters doesn’t mean that deaf people are equal.”

# Traduttore traditore

The next-day morning session – traitor translator – shifted the attention to the crucial role played by translation in the transmission of knowledge and in the development of interculturality. It also brought to light the reality of intercultural exchanges.

This session aimed at providing an insight into the reality of translation from different perspectives, while trying to answer the following main questions:

- How does translation show the reality of our exchanges?
- When do translations become barriers instead of breaking them?
- What is actually lost during a translation?

In the beginning of the session, the moderators, Emma Jayne Park and Rita Sala, gave heed to the multilingual background of the audience. They asked participants to set an informal exchange of thoughts related to the barriers that everyone faces when dealing with translation [→Task Box 1]

## Contributor

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes – [Transeuropéennes](#), France

## Moderators

Emma Jayne Park – [Cultured Mongrel](#), Scotland

Rita Sala – [Ca' Foscari University of Venice](#), Italy

## Sing Language Interpreters

Daniela Franco – Italian → Italian Sign Language (LIS)

Davy Mariotti – LIS → International Sign Language (IS)

Elena Acquadro – Italian → Italian Sign Language (LIS)

Elisa Vasco – LIS → International Sign Language (IS)

## TASK 1: BARRIERS OF TRANSLATION

Aim: To identify the experiences present in the room in terms of language accessibility and issues about translation.

Room layout: Chairs arranged along the walls; participants can move them in the space as needed.

Task: Ask the audience what their native language is and make them form groups based on their native languages. The moderator can ask participants to raise their hands if they are native speakers of a certain language and move altogether to a specific area of the room. If one language is underrepresented, people can decide either to join one of the other groups or form a special group of people speaking a second language as a medium (e.g. English). Once the native language groups are formed, they will talk for 15 minutes trying to answer two questions:

- 1) What barriers do you face when having your language translated?
- 2) What do you think is lost when your language is translated?

When time is up, the groups get 10 minutes to feedback to the rest of the audience.

At the end of the discussion time, each linguistic group shared its outlook. The challenges and issues that were identified:

- A cultural factor present in languages (like physicality and emotional tools, expressions, gestures) which is difficult to translate;
- a body as a tool that shows what is unsaid / omitted during translation;
- translation devices as barriers, both in terms of limiting the visual access to the scene and failing to convey the emotional part of a discourse;
- a challenge to translate art pieces: translating poetry, for instance, means creating a new work from scratch detaching from the source and transmitting the impressions over the literal meanings;
- translation as a way for minority languages not to be lost under pressure of hegemonic cultures.

### *Intercultural bias. The Transeuropéennes translation map*

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes's experience with translation traces back to the foundation of the Transeuropéennes international journal of critical thought in 1993. The journal co-published a shared issue in English and French on theatre and public space with IETM in 1996.

The activism of Transeuropéennes, which was both a journal and an NGO, was about articulating culture and politics at each level of collective action. The aim was to create bridges in regions marked by divisions and fractures, (e.g. Balkans, Euro-Mediterranean region).

In 2008, the Transeuropéennes' Mapping project was started with the purpose of mapping the translations processes within the Euro-Mediterranean region. Such a mapping needed networks, contributions and partners, transforming this cartography project into seminars, workshops, transversal studies and conferences, including some works on translation in theatre.

## HISTORY BOX 4: THE BARCELONA PROCESS

The Euro-Mediterranean partnership was launched in Barcelona in 1995, but it was only the end of a process constructed and theorised in the previous years, starting from the late 1980s. This process was created to pursue stability by:

- Re-connecting former Soviet Union countries to the Western block;
- Comprehending the Israel-Palestinian co-habitation.

Besides the economic objective to establish a common free trade area, the Barcelona Process also aimed at intensifying the discourse on human rights, social issues and cultural exchange of the 38 countries involved in the partnership. The main actions of the Process included meetings between ministers and, once a year, between presidents. At the same time, funding from the European Commission and the participating countries financed exchange events. Of course, some countries were more collaborative (e.g. Morocco, Lebanon) than others (e.g. Egypt, where the Cairo human rights network had to shut down and work in exile). The network started to lose power during the Arab Spring and with the establishment of the new 'Mediterranean Union' under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, which officially replaced the Barcelona Process in 2008 (Joffe and Vasconcelos, 2014; Attinà and Stavridis, 2001).

The outcomes of the project showed that, despite the Barcelona process in the 90s [→ [History Box 4](#)], there were a lot of politico-economic and cultural inequalities and ignorance in the Euro-Mediterranean relations, which can be revealed through the translation practices. Ghislaine shared some data collected during the mapping process.

- From 1985 to 2000, only 0.64% of texts translated into French are Arabic, while 60% (Maghreb countries) and 10% (Egypt) of translated works in Arabic come from French publications. English translations of Arabic works are also very marginal, whereas a vast majority of books translated into Arabic are original English works, with a percentage varying from 90% (Gulf countries) to 20% (Maghreb countries).
- Imbalances in translation flows seem to be the rule. Turkish works, for example, are translated into French (0,15%), Spanish and Polish (0,05%) as well as into Macedonian (1,76%) and Bulgarian (0,57%). Whereas 55,7% of works translated into Turkish come from English, 8,63% from French and 6% from Arabic or German.

Mapping the translation processes makes us aware of the high number of what Ghislaine calls monologues - fractures of translation processes caused by historical events. Some of the events / issues / tendencies identified:

- Major historical events, such as the fall of the Berlin wall, had a great impact on the regular translation policies. Many Arab countries dealing with the Eastern bloc, for example, ceased to translate works from the former USSR territories. Before the fall, Poland translated a lot from/into Arabic, especially from south Saharan regions. After the fall, Poland started to translate mostly into English and Hebrew.
- Countries that are in war-in-peace realities (as defined by Ghislaine) with each other, like the Balkan region, avoid translating from and into each other languages.
- Nationalism has a great impact on translation, due to the demand for national perspective and ethnically driven cultural policies.
- The huge impact of the market, for example, in the field of literature, human and social sciences, increases the cultural hegemonies of languages that were and are considered as most relevant.

Symptoms of cultural hegemony could also be traced in consolidated translation practices, such as the use of a third language as a proxy. When translating from Polish to Arabic, translations often pass from Arab to English and then from English to Polish. Portuguese translations often pass from English. An Arabic translator, on the other hand, usually translates from the French adaptation of a manuscript.

On a closing note, Ghislaine underlined that translation policies are missing and very much needed, as not only language policies are politics, but also the translating process is a political action. Without translation, we don't have access to the Other and to the world of the Other. Transeuropéennes is a project that raises many questions that need to be addressed in an international setting.

### *The translator job*

While closing the conversation on translation, the moderators invited the audience to discuss in mixed native language groups what is the impact of translation on our way of experiencing the world [[→Task Box 2](#)]

Some of the issues discussed:

- Gender can potentially affect the written translation, and it definitely does so in a live social context, when very specific choices of who is talking for whom are made. Participants also spoke of the very common situation where the translator is the first available person, no matter if his/her gender matches the gender of the translated person. When female-gendered terms are used by gay people when speaking about themselves, or female-gendered terms are used by others when speaking about gay people, the gender of the interpreter can misdirect the conversation. Of course, this context issue doesn't immediately come up in the literal word-by-word translation.
- Dialects and accents also play a role, like the Scottish or the Southern Italian accent, which in popular culture can often be associated with

## **TASK 2: THE TRANSLATOR JOB**

Aim: To understand the impact of translation on how we experience each other.

Task: Split the audience into mixed language groups (compresence of deaf and hearing people in one group is subjected to the number of interpreters). Each group has 15 minutes to discuss the questions:

- 1) Do we need a translating tool that supports the translation of culture?
- 2) Is ownership of your own culture and identity lost in translation?
- 3) Is accent important in translation?
- 4) What impact does it have if a female translator is voicing a man?
- 5) What is the relationship between power, dialects and accents?

When time is up, groups get 10 minutes to feedback to the rest of the audience.

representations of poverty. Moreover, some accents are not permitted on stage in Italy, while others are considered as theatrical dialects and are allowed (e.g. Sicilian, Venice).

- The way the dubbing of movies is done can also play a role: in different countries, like in Italy, dubbing aims to be as close as possible to what the actors are saying, but that might not be the case in other countries.
- Cultural expectations in arts and live performances: who gets to speak Shakespeare? One of the participants took part in a Shakespeare production in Brazil, where there were specific ideas about who could be considered a Shakespearean character and who not. The simple presence of a black performer playing a particular role transformed the production into a political statement.

# Performance, gesture and sign language

Sign languages are not legally and socially recognised in all countries in the world. They are still seen as the simple interpretation of spoken languages, even though they are the expression of distinct cultures. During the meeting, it became evident to hearing participants that sign languages have been and still are subject to numerous prejudices and erroneous conceptions. Chiara Branchini led the audience to understand the complex linguistic nature of sign languages. Mindy Drapsa gave an important testimony of how the integration of sign language in theatres can not only be made possible but can also be used as a social awareness mechanism.

The session opened with many questions and with an introductory group activity to prepare the audience to listen to the contributions. [→[Task Box 3](#)].

## Contributors

Chiara Branchini – [Ca' Foscari University of Venice](#), Italy

Mindy Drapsa – [Riksteaterns Tyst Teater](#), Sweden

Anna Consolati – [Oriente Occidente Dance Festival](#), Italy

## Moderators

Emma Jayne Park – [Cultured Mongrel](#), Scotland

Rita Sala – [Ca' Foscari University of Venice](#), Italy

## Sing Language Interpreters

Klara Svensson – Interpreter for Mindy Drapsa

Daniela Franco – Italian → Italian Sign Language (LIS)

Davy Mariotti – LIS → International Sign Language (IS)

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## Sign languages and recognition barriers

Chiara Branchini, a sign language academic, introduced the audience to the linguistic nature of sign languages. She talked about linguistic accessibility through a linguist point of view.

Sign languages are complex natural languages, fully comparable to the vocal ones. As demonstrated by deaf and hearing linguists during the last sixty years, signs are not gestures and sign languages are not pantomimes.

Understanding of the difference between a gesture and a sign is important for the recognition of deaf culture. People are often surprised when they discover that there isn't one sign language for all deaf people all over the world. When one finds out that each country has its own sign language, usually the reaction is a surprise: "But why? At least the deaf community could make things easier and share one language". The answer lies precisely in the linguistic nature of sign languages. Each language community develops its own language, since one of the characteristics of languages is arbitrariness: the lack of a specific reason for the use of the same sequence of sounds to indicate a significance; thus, different languages use different sound sequences to indicate the same meaning. In the same way, different sign languages that evolved far from each other developed different signs to denote the same referents.

Furthermore, behind the prejudice that all sign languages are identical throughout the world, is the assumption that sign languages are pantomimes, same as the mime. When we meet a mime on the street in a foreign country whose language we don't speak, we understand what s/he's saying anyway. The mime uses gestures and facial expressions that are understandable because s/he is mimicking the actions we do daily. Pantomime is not a language, it is a communication system that does not have the complex system of rules that natural languages have. The sign, instead, is the basis of the sign language and has an internal structure at a phonological,

## TASK 3: MESSAGES OF INCLUSION

Aim: To visually understand people's experiences and ways of framing specific topics.

Room layout: Semi-circle of chairs facing PowerPoint equipment. Clear division between the two opposite sides of the room (chairs of different colours, for instance).

Task: Make the audience stand up and instruct them as follows: the left side of the room means "yes absolutely", being the pole of agreement; whereas the right side of the room means "no, definitely not", being the pole of disagreement. Staying in the middle indicates staying in between agreement and disagreement.

The moderator then reads some statements and participants chose their side. The statements were:

- I speak some form of sign language;
- I have worked alongside an interpreter before;
- I have offered signed performances of work before;
- I have seen work where sign language is integrated into the performance and not just interpreted;
- I have been involved in the creation of work made by deaf theatre makers;
- I have integrated sign language into my performance work before;
- I think about integrating sign into the performance from the first stages of developing my idea;
- I think of integrating sign language as more of an access requirement than an artistic choice;
- I know where to recruit performers from the deaf community;
- When I write production budgets, I include costs for interpreters (or other requirements) so we can work with deaf performers.

## BONUS SIGN LANGUAGE QUIZ

Use the same rules for a quick Sign Language Quiz.

**Sign language was invented by someone at some point in history, yes or no?**

No, no one invented it. Sign language is a natural language.

**Signing and gesturing are the same?**

No [→ See the contribution by Rita Sala]

**Sign language is a unique language?**

No [→ See the contribution by Chiara Branchini]

morphological and syntactic level that the gesture does not possess.

Chiara reported two additional neurological and linguistic pieces of evidence that showed the difference between gestures and signs, namely, the non-linguistic status of the former versus the linguistic status of the latter.

Neurological research shows that the left cerebral hemisphere is the one used for language skills, the right one is used for visual and spatial abilities. When sign language is used, the same areas in the left hemisphere that are triggered with vocal language are active, showing that sign languages are true natural languages. Furthermore, studying people with brain

damage to the left hemisphere, in the areas of language, showed that deaf signers are no longer able to sign but can gesticulate. The gestures remain intact, but the signs are not, since the linguistic areas in the brain are damaged.

Recognition of sign languages as minority languages is a current central issue, as much as the consequent primary rights that should be granted.

Deaf people are a peculiar type of linguistic minority, as 95% of them are born from hearing parents and are not exposed to sign language from birth. Today there is a lot at stake, especially in such countries, like Italy, where the national sign language is still not recognised as a minority language, despite the fact that in 2006 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities prescribed to all signatories to recognise their national sign languages [[→ History Box 1](#)].

The vocal language is not fully accessible to deaf people; even with the aid of prosthetic devices, the acquisition of the linguistic signal is never complete. The right to language is a primary human right; not being able to access a language also means not being able to develop one's own identity. For deaf people, using sign language is not the same as knowing an extra language. On the contrary, having early access to sign language can guarantee them cognitive, linguistic and social development and allows them to communicate in the world. Today, therefore, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

- What are the everyday difficulties deaf people face due to the lack of linguistic accessibility they experience?
- What can we do to tear down the existing communication barriers?
- What resources (including technological ones) can be used?

### *Theatre as an empowering aid for deaf culture*

Riksteatern is a nationally funded Stockholm-based theatre, divided into different departments. Among the theatre, dance, youth and other departments, there is the Tyst Teater (Silent Theatre in Swedish), founded in 1970 and part of Riksteatern since 1977. Today Riksteatern is an established association of about 230 member organisations throughout Sweden. Members both organise and host productions, ordering the performances in advance and allowing other member organisations to tour nationally.

Mindy Drapsa, the artistic leader of Tyst Teater, talked about how this unique organisation integrates sign language in theatre. Everyone in the Tyst Teater is deaf, including herself, one producer, two actors, and one marketer. The only hearing person is the interpreter, whose job is also to let the team communicate with other departments at Riksteatern. The performances are mainly created in Sweden, but also in other countries. Sometimes the company hosts sign language performances from abroad and performers from other countries are invited to collaborate as well. The company do 2-3 sign language performances every year, mostly in Swedish sign language but always accessible for hearing people. The performances can be subtitled (on the screen or the scene), voiced over or translated by an interpreter on or off stage. All these different solutions are offered, but it's up to the play director to decide how s/he wants the oral language to be included on stage. Either way, the performance has to be accessible to everyone, not only to deaf or signing people.

Art is a very important form of education and integration. The power of art can make a difference in promoting change and making things equal and accessible to everyone. On these premises, Tyst Teater brings up some kind of political features in each of its plays. When the company produced *House of Bernarda* – famous



play by the Spanish author Federico García Lorca – the Milan Congress in 1880 [[→ History Box 2](#)] was added as a historical element in the play to educate and inform the audience about a defining moment in deaf history on stage. Likewise, the next production of *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare is not going to be a love story, but also a story of some elderly deaf people. In Sweden, many deaf elderly people live alone, without anyone to communicate to in sign language. In the very end of their life, they can become very isolated in their own language. The play aims at making society aware of the healthcare problems of deaf people. Finally, giving role models to a new generation is another fundamental goal. When Tyst Teater made a play with a deaf Pippi Longstocking, children loved her.

As culture is a very important thing that must be accessible to everybody, the use of different languages on stage is crucial. Mindy underlined the importance of using the visual channel and experimenting with visual elements, including visual vernacular.

## Sign language combined with theatre is empowerment

Tyst Teater latest production is called *Hem* – the Swedish word for “home” – and it is about deaf refugees. Recalling the big crisis happening in 2015, when a lot of refugees came from the Middle East to Sweden and other European countries, the media coverage was massive, but nobody talked about deaf refugees. Most of them didn't go to school in their country, so suddenly they had to travel without being able to know what was happening and not being able to tell their story. The project involved 30 refugees. They were all interviewed, and because they didn't use sign languages in their home countries, most of the communication passed through gestures. It wasn't therefore possible to follow the usual production process and write manuscripts. Hence the video recordings of the interviews were used to show the actors what the refugees were expressing. There was a kind of skeleton manuscript, and during the rehearsal the actors had access to the video material in order to learn the gestures, the language and the expressions and the ways deaf refugees were signing. In the play there were three actors on stage, two deaf and one hearing. The four main characters were played by the two deaf actors, while the hearing actress was voicing all the characters. The hearing actor was also playing 16 minor roles. She was acting as a mother, a teacher, police officers or whatever, and, at the same time, she was speaking what the deaf actors were communicating. There are a lot of plays where a deaf actor is signing all the characters and does other things. In *Hem* it is the other way around. It was one hearing actor translating all the play and also acting different roles. And this exciting experiment worked.

In *Hem*, various communication means were used: gestures, Swedish sign language and visual vernacular. Language deprivation is a significant issue that this play wanted to cover. It was important to leave the errors or the communication gestures in the play, as the characters, who didn't have full access to education as children in their real life, lacked some language skills, and this was visible in their use of Swedish sign



*Hem* - Tyst Teater. Photo: Mikael Sundberg

language. The same gestures - the Arabic signs and missing words or errors that the interviewed deaf refugees used - were adopted on stage. The hearing person doing the voice over was speaking in the same way, some words were missing, some errors occurred.

### Question time

Several questions to the contributors brought up a few new points:

- There are 24 official oral languages and 31 sign languages in the European Union. Different countries speak a variation of the same vocal language, usually because different populations met and one dominated the other. This is not the case for sign languages. Countries like the USA, Australia and England have different sign languages. In Spain, there is the Spanish Sign Language, but also the Catalan Sign Language.
- Talking about sign language recognition, it is important to underline that implementation of services and awareness rising don't automatically come with formal recognition. On the other hand, recognition is the first step, which gives hope for further steps.
- As for vocal languages, slang sign languages also develops alongside the official sign language. In all natural languages, communities living far away from the centre and each other develop their linguistic variety. Each slang has its history. Besides the urban sign language explanation by Rinkoo in his first-day contribution, Chiara brought the Italian example. In Italy, there are different variations of sign languages that differ not only from region to region but even within the same city. Because deaf people were denied to sign for over 100 years, religious schools were the ones teaching deaf children, dividing the groups into female and male classes, not allowing them to meet. Therefore, different varieties of sign languages were developed in the same communities. Recently, when sign language started to be used broadly, for example, in television, the Roman sign languages became mainstream.
- Productions in sign language should be aimed at a general public. Most of the people attending Tyst Teater productions are sign language users. There are also lots of people that work with deaf people in different ways (e.g. social services, healthcare) or people that are interested in deaf

cultures and languages. Most of the time plays are in Swedish and in Swedish Sign Language, but the goal is to make it accessible for as many people as possible. Willingness to make performances from a minority perspective is a matter of power as well.

- There are different ways of integrating the deaf culture into performances aimed at deaf and hearing audiences. One can be the use of silence on different levels (e.g. total absence of sounds or using only sound effects), but it can be sometimes inconvenient for hearing audiences, and it's always a director's choice. Otherwise, performers resort to ways to make the sound accessible for deaf people. Shane O'Reilly, for example, integrates speaking and signing on stage using particular sound frequencies that can be felt by the audience. The usage of this kind of solutions also depends on the location where the performance takes place. It might be difficult, for example, to adopt such tricks in an old and basic theatre.
- Referring to the increasing presence of gender equality policies in Europe, the session also reflected on how other types of inclusion can be taken into consideration. It was suggested that inclusion must be part of the discourse at every meeting, in every programme decision and in every creative process. The debate about gender seems to be further ahead, but we have a responsibility to consider other minorities. If we decide not to be inclusive or to be inclusive only for some types of audiences and not for others, we have to be aware that we own that decision.
- Is deafness a disability? From a personal standpoint, Mindy doesn't see herself as a person with a disability. Nevertheless, sometimes, when she is looking for funding, inter alia money for interpreters, on behalf of Tyst Teater, she has to adopt the disability label. Besides the funding issue, she sees herself as part of

a linguistic minority or a different culture. However, belonging to a language minority doesn't grant as much access or recognition as being identified as a disabled person. Of course, any country is different. In Sweden, a strong deaf movement in the 70s achieved a lot in terms of the recognition of the deaf people rights, and now there is national permanent funding for deaf productions and sign language performances. From a social research angle, Chiara confirmed this duplicity. Some countries consider deafness as a disability, more than a language barrier. But one could spin the perspective by asking "Am I a disabled person or is it the society around me that creates the conditions for me to be a disabled person?" In this sense, if we keep framing deafness as a disability, we might undermine deaf people's chance to obtain more accessibility.

### *Communication, disability and accessibility*

The unplanned contribution by the director Anna Consolati gave a quick overview of the challenges of working on communication barriers in Italy. Anna is part of Oriente Occidente Dance Festival, a historic festival of contemporary dance in Rovereto, now in its 39th edition. Since 2007, the group has dealt with dance and disability. In addition to promoting workshops related to the topic, starting from 2015, they began to bring different bodies and different types of dance to the festival programme. Thanks to this commitment, the group is now one of the partners of three EU-funded projects, Impart being one of them.

Having partners from Germany, Greece and Armenia, Impart seeks to investigate languages by translating the choreographic language and other types of artistic languages in order to make them accessible to diversity, without crippling the language in the process of translation, for the translation to be an input and not a limit.

Thanks to the international funding, Anna's cultural association took up the challenge of

accessibility in its various aspects. The work towards inclusion has been developed also from the audience point of view, allowing people with disabilities or other minorities to come and attend the shows (e.g. bracelet with vibration for deaf people).

On a final note, Anna underlined an important issue that arises when working with art and disability. In Italy, any discourse regarding disability is immediately connected with social support. People's imagination leads to thinking that contemporary dance work with disability is social work. As a consequence, the public often assumes that these performances are of poor artistic quality, paternalistically applauding "because disabled people are in it". The inclusive work promoted by Anna's association is aimed at challenging this vision. Their goal is to produce art, to look for new performances and new bodies that challenge the norm when seeking new aesthetics.

# Do you understand my art?

The perception of the performance passes through the conversation on the performance itself and, more broadly, through how art is understood. The performing arts are known to resonate with elite communication codes. By being in touch with this elite, we tend to tap into those codes even further. But overly complex work, as well as the way to communicate about it, creates linguistic apartheid. So, how can artists create and talk about their work in a way that is understandable for everyone without being condescending or compromising their art?

The moderators warmed up the audience with a group activity focused on the perception of the language related to performances [[→Task Box 4](#)].



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## Contributor

Amy Rosa Mclachlan Sayer – [Northumbria University Newcastle](#), UK

## Moderators

Emma Jayne Park – [Cultured Mongrel](#), Scotland

Rita Sala – [Ca' Foscari University of Venice](#), Italy

## Sing Language Interpreters

Daniela Franco – Italian → Italian Sign Language (LIS)

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Elena Acquadro – Italian → Italian Sign Language (LIS)

Elisa Vasco – LIS → International Sign Language (IS)

## TASK 4: LET'S HAVE A WORD ON PERFORMANCE

Aim: Share the insiders' point of view and make the participant reflect on the words and the language related to performances. This task is not supposed to exhaust the conversation but to open it up.

Room layout: Preferably a circle.

Task: Make participants turn to the person seated next to them. They don't need to share the same native language; they express themselves with gestures and facial expressions if they can't communicate with words.

Let them think about really annoying words used to describe performances (e.g: Emma: "I'm a dancer and I hear the word Organic all the time... I really don't know what it means.").

Then give them the following tasks:

- 1) You have 30 seconds each to define the words that you would like to ban from descriptions of performances;
- 2) You have 30 seconds each to list the words that, if used, might stop you from going to see the performance;
- 3) You have 30 seconds to define the words you have used to describe art that make you cringe;

In the end, ask everyone to share their name, their job and just one annoying word going around the circle.



The most annoying words used to describe artistic performances, shared by people attending the session.

Then the meeting moved on to a long table session with Amy Rosa McLachlan.

## THE LONG TABLE FORMAT

**Aim:** According to the [LADA](#) (Live Art Development Agency), the Long Table “is an experimental open public forum that is a hybrid performance-installation-roundtable-discussion-dinner-party designed to facilitate dialogue through the gathering together of people with common interests”. Conceived by Lois Weaver and inspired by Marleen Gorris’ film *Antonia’s Line*, this format cleverly combines public engagement and theatricality intending to be vocal on a sensitive (social) topic while maintaining an informal setting.

**Room layout:** One large table in the centre of the room with six seats, surrounded by circles of chairs. The table should have snacking foods on it, some large sheets of paper and pens.

**Task:** After a keynote speaker introduces the topic, invite everyone who wishes to come and seat at the table to join the conversation. Anyone can talk, however, only if seated at the table. Once joined the table, everyone can eat and write down notes. If microphones are provided, they should be left on the table. Also, some post-its might be left on the floor under the audience’s chairs, anyone who doesn’t want to sit at the table but wants to give a contribution, can write on the post-it and put it on the table. Conversation can move between topics.

### *Exclusive words on art*

The session started with Amy Rosa as the keynote speaker introducing the topic. She shared her artistic journey and moderated the subsequent discussion.

Amy Rosa is an artist based in Glasgow working with large-scale sculptures and intimate performance. Her perspective is of a person living with chronic illness and being a disabled woman in a deeply inaccessible world. Her work is mostly silent and very visual, focusing on creating abstract environments that alter the perception of time and space and using rituals and slow movement.

When the meaning of a piece of art is more open, there’s less chance for the interpretation of the work to be a binary ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and so it frees the audience member from the weight of having to ‘understand’ the work, because funnily enough there is no historically set standard for appreciating abstract live art. It’s bizarre, but everyone thinks so, including the artist, so you’re in the same club.

There are many socio-economic barriers to the arts, money being the main one. If you can’t afford to pay for your electricity, how are you going to budget for the theatre or ballet?

It’s also really hard to actually make a living as an artist, and therefore it’s not seen as a viable career move. When you don’t have financial support from family, it’s a much longer and harder journey to get to the same place for you, than for your peers supported by their families. And if we don’t have working class artists, how diverse is the art being produced and seen? Those voices from different backgrounds not being heard will exclude people further, as there are fewer mirrors being held up to their lived experiences, and their stories aren’t being told. The only way to encourage people from different backgrounds to see and to make artwork is to make it more accessible, physically, socially and financially.

Furthermore, arts are not promoted in state schooling, as there’s a sense of ‘it’s not for us’ because it’s portrayed as frivolous and unnecessary. The funding to the drama

and art and language departments in schools are the first to go when government spending cuts arrive, (if they have ever left). This creates even more barriers to the arts in the first place, particularly compared to students attending private schools.

The subtler but equally dangerous form of exclusion is in the language used within the art world. It’s not just the ways we talk about work, which can be florid and full of descriptive words, it’s even sneakier than that. It’s a psychological barrier, an invisible barrier reminding you that you aren’t wearing the right clothes or using the right words or being the right sort of person. It’s the embarrassment when someone uses a word you don’t understand, the lack of confidence to ask what it means for fear of being laughed at again. It’s being caught out in a world you feel out of place in.

Ultimately though, language plays a crucial part. People make assumptions based on accents, drawing conclusions regarding the social class or the upbringing of a person. Amy Rosa’s own experience is a clear example of how language and accents can be both artistic allies and audience dissuaders. Coming from a working-class background but a daughter of a library assistant, she had the privilege of being introduced, through books, to art, concepts, worlds and words that are inaccessible to most poor people. Later in life, Amy Rosa developed a strong interest in theatre (eventually leading to a career in live art) resulting in the disappearance of her childhood Norfolk accent, which ironically made people assume she was ‘posh’. She recognises both the deep frustration that comes with being misrepresented, particularly having spent her childhood in social housing with very few opportunities, and the privilege that comes with having a certain kind of English accent.

Language as a tool of the ruling class has always been a form of control. As a native English speaker, Amy Rosa recognised that there is a responsibility to acknowledge the privilege that goes with speaking English and to question the historic colonial attitudes that still exist today. Within the English language too, there are barriers, and they are used to create and maintain social divides.

She wrote: “So, how can we make the language we use about art more inclusive without being horribly patronising? We can change the words we use to some extent, but is that not as unimaginative as adding a ramp to a venue and calling it fully accessible? Or having one woman or person of colour on a board of directors and calling it diverse? Changing our approach to accessibility shouldn't be about oversimplifying or being condescending but about changing the points of access to the arts.”

On a final note, Amy Rosa brought up the example of Platform in Glasgow, an arts centre offering a year-round theatre programme, exhibitions, workshops and gigs. Based in Easterhouse, a geographically isolated area of pronounced socio-economic deprivation, Platform is located within a building called The Bridge, which also has a swimming pool, library and a college campus, integrated into a space that the community uses regularly. Her final words: “Providing access, generating interest and modifying but not oversimplifying the language we use when we talk about our work are some of the practical ways to open up access to the arts, while we try to fix the systemic problems facing wealth inequality and cultural disparity in our society. I realise I just ended on a really complicated sentence, so I'll try to do better. It's not that people don't understand art or complex ideas, it's that we are not often offered the opportunity to do so.”

### *The long table conversation*

At the end of Amy Rosa's presentation, everyone could join the conversation by sitting at the table. Here are the main insights revealed during that talk:

- Artistic accessibility, in terms of acceptability, can be a complex matter. There is a money issue: for example, the median income in Ireland is € 39.000 and the median income for an artist is € 13.000. So how can an artist career be made accessible? Secondly, there is the integrity of the work, meaning how we handle culture, performances, literature, visual art that is perceived to be difficult. How

do we engage as many people as possible to be interested in that work in a way that doesn't compromise the integrity of the work and that allows the work to be as contradictory and complex as it is?

- It can be a matter of how we communicate the art that we make. When we have to think about communicating a work in advance for someone who will come to see it, for example, in a festival brochure or a website, we often have to come up with 100 words. The meanings can be read in so many different ways; it's often hard to grasp exactly what the work is about. This issue is about the relationship between the person who is on stage and the person receiving the work. We often tend to make assumptions about the people that don't engage, the people that don't enjoy the work that we make. There is a sense of what makes people feel stupid or inadequate, and that makes the artists think their work isn't good. Therefore, we should keep in mind the question: “How do we use language to frame our work?” Sometimes the work itself is designed to exclude people: a huge part of the performing arts is really based on systems of hierarchy, exclusion and cultural capital.
- Particularly in less popular forms of art, people often get hanged up with the idea of a necessity of understanding things deeper. They feel like there is something wrong with them because they didn't understand what they have seen. It might be about shifting the discourse about art from being about something to being something. The thing that is created, not the thing that leads to the creation.
- Language is a dangerous thing, as it is part of everything that we do. We make assumptions about people's status based on the language they use. So, is there a way to make language neutral so that it cannot be used for judging or criticising others? Is there a way to detach the language that we use from the work that we create? More broadly, we should ask ourselves if it is possible to equalise different languages, and how we can do so. It is a question of social control and social class barriers, of how language is intrinsic to the class system. Historically, language has been used as a form of control. Bringing theatre into schools, try to convince pupils that it is not for middle-upper classes but is a way of expressing themselves and the more people do that, the more experiences are out there and the more interesting arts are created. Otherwise, we are in a vacuum. In a very practical way, it's about bringing art and theatre into different communities, finding platforms to demystify art, making it not scary but inviting, so that it seems acceptable not to fully understand it.
- Also from the performance point of view, language is a virus: it can be adaptive but destructive at the same time. One of the challenges is making the show accessible for people who had less access to education. There is a constant adaptation, but we have to remember that it is impossible for our work to please everybody; this attempt can be even destructive. We are doing art for a reason, we are intending to tell a certain story, and we have to remember our motivations.
- It's also about the means, the vehicle. There are different languages out there, and the tough part is to understand each other. It doesn't matter which is one's native language or which language is used on the stage, the problem is the communication medium and art is just another vehicle. Even when we talk in our mother tongue, we are already transmitting and translating something. When we communicate, it cannot be anything but a translation.

# Introduction to sign languages and their culture

Rita Mazza is an Italian native signer, meaning that signs are her native language. She could communicate, live and interact through sign language; signs helped her to shape her identity. Thanks to Italian Sign Language (LIS), Rita was able to learn other languages.

Rita's contribution to the meeting aimed at exploring the way sign language generates its own culture and addresses the potential of non-verbal communication.

## What is a sign?

After birth, we all receive information from body language, we start by indicating objects and then slowly we learn a language. A language can be built through the vocal-acoustic canal, it can be transmitted through the written channel, and there is also a visual-gestural frequency.

Language can, therefore, have different forms: the spoken one is the most used by hearing people and it uses the vocal-acoustic channel. Then there is the gestural language that passes through the visual channel, and it can be learned through eyes.

As already underlined by Chiara Branchini's contribution, scientific research shows that there are linguistic rules that a sign has to fulfil to be called such, as Sign Languages have linguistic-grammatical structures, like any other language. The sign uses, borrows the use of the body. Hence the confusion between the gesture and the sign.

Miming and gestures are used a lot in Italy. There are almost spontaneous, universal

gestures that do not need to be explained, as they are usually understandable to everyone. However, the signs that are used in sign language to indicate what those universal gestures mean are actually not the same. There is no motion in Sign Language. Sign users only use the upper part of the body, with only hands moving.

## How is a sign created?

There are five main parameters. A correct sign is the one respecting all five of them.

- 1) Handshape – the configuration of the hands. It can be, for example, a five, clenched fist, one finger or 'o' shape configuration, and many more;
- 2) Orientation – the palm of the hand can change its orientation and be faced forward, below, tilted to the left, or in a lower closed fist;
- 3) Location – the space where the sign is articulated;
- 4) Movement;
- 5) Facial expression – the modulation is conveyed through facial expression, informing the interlocutor about the intentions (e.g. is it a question? It is a statement!). The intensity of facial expression also indicates the intensity of an adjective (e.g. good, very good, the best).

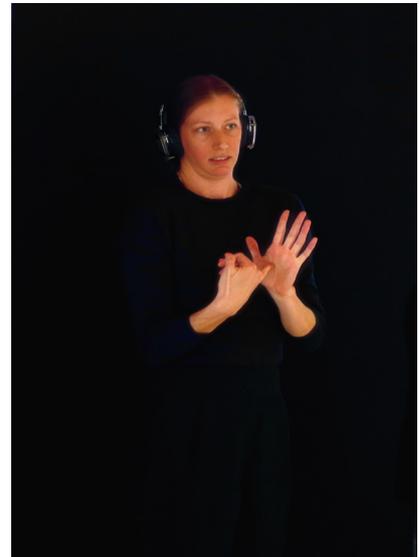
The combination of these parameters gives a clear message, as much as the voice modulation in vocal languages.

## Contributor

Rita Mazza – [Festival del Silenzio](#), Italy

## Sign Language Interpreter

Chiara Fassina – LIS → Italian Interpreter for Rita Mazza



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## Is it the same in every sign language?

There isn't only one sign language in the world [→ Chiara Branchini's contribution]. Each country has its sign language and is connected to the culture of the place. Nevertheless, there are some rules of visual languages that are universal, for example, the configuration and expression of the face are always connected to the sign, but always respecting the culture of the country.

For the word "mom", for example, the configuration is different from sign language to sign language. However, just as there are similarities in the sound of the word in spoken languages, the same is true for sign languages (see the signs for 'mom' in different sign languages on Spread the Sign).

Sign language is a very old language, it has existed since deaf people in the world started using their hands to communicate and convey information to each other. Deaf culture is very strong. Moreover, there is a kind of a global deaf culture that inevitably links deaf people all over the world.

Everyone can learn sign language. Learning sign language can be useful to anyone: it can broaden mind, enhance visual contact, bring people closer to their body and bring the body closer to other people. It allows to train the cerebral hemisphere connected to visual capabilities. Meeting a native signing person is equivalent to meeting a person who does not speak our language. Don't panic, just try to establish a visual contact, beyond words, and find alternative ways to communicate.

## How do we identify ourselves?

It is important to give each person the chance to use the definition they prefer when it comes to their own identity. Rita chooses to use "native signer" because it reflects her identity. She does not find herself in the "deaf" word because she just listens differently. For her, the word "deaf" is a medical concept that emphasises what is missing, but it has nothing to do

with what a person is. In some situations, however, one has to use the word "deaf". For example, if someone keeps knocking the door of a public restroom complaining about not receiving an answer, it is clearer and more direct to say "I'm deaf", rather than "I'm a native signer".

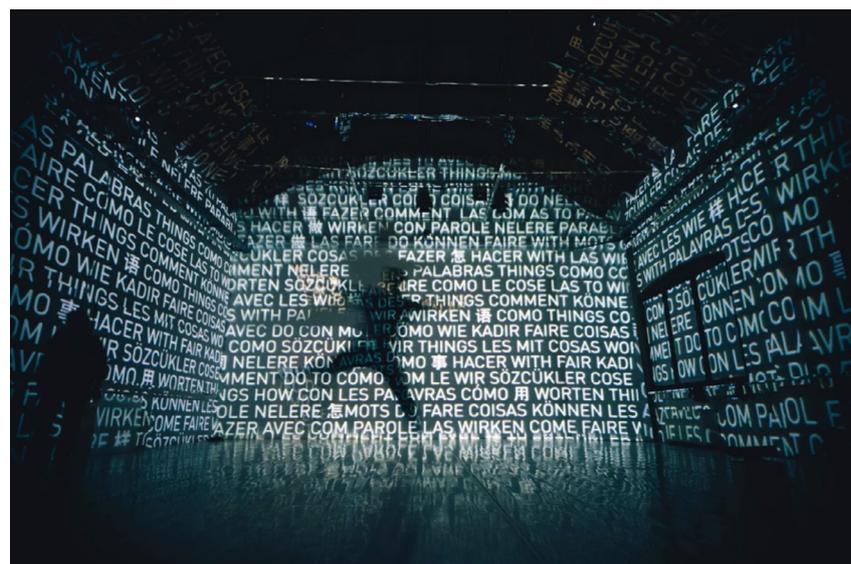
## How does sign language relate to the performing arts?

Sign language is not choreography. People might think that signing is a nice movement because they don't know sign language. Once someone learns sign language, s/he understands that it is not a dance of hands. It is the same difference of hearing the sounds of a language we don't know and then becoming aware of what those sounds mean.

Undeniably, certain inherent characteristics of sign language give an advantage in the art world. For example, the specificity of the details provided by sign language is very clear. If we want to say how a car is parked compared to a tree in sign language, the movement of hand leaves no room for interpretation. The world of signs is very diverse and has artistic forms within it. The poems heard or linked to words are widely known, but also sign language has its poetic

forms and certainly, if these poems were translated into another language, they would lose their original taste.

Visual vernacular is a form of visual poetry. It is not only linked to language, but it also extrapolates, borrows from the language and takes on a life of its own. It develops a scene, imagines moving pictures, captures the meaning without knowing specific signs.



VOXsolo - Ariella Vidach-AiEP at Festival del Silenzio. Photo: Mik Di Savino

# Strange language

In current times of hypermobility, language is no longer linked to a territory, yet it is still linked to a culture. According to Humboldt's concept of *Weltanschauung*, a language is a way of perceiving the world common to a certain group of people. How can we ensure linguistic diversity without falling into the error of building new barriers or reinforcing the existing ones? How can linguistic diversity create a frame for ecological relations between cultural groups as a condition for equitable interactions and organic cultural change and mutual understanding?

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## TASK 5: WHISPERING SIGNS

**Aim:** To get acquainted and experiment with sign language and see how it can change and grow.

**Task:** Form two (or more) long lines across the room with a sign language interpreter at one end. The interpreter will sign one simple phrase in Sign Language to the first person in the line, and this phrase will be passed along. This first person in line has to touch the shoulder of the next person and repeat the phrase, while everybody else has to be faced in the opposite direction. Each person turns only when the phrase is meant to be passed to him/her. The final phrase is then compared with the original one when it reaches the end of the line. It's important that participants are at the same language level.



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## *Have we lost the silence?*

Dam Van Huynh, dance artist and choreographer, shared his performative understanding of passing through confines. His life and his work have been highly influenced by his origins and by the cultures that he encountered starting from his experience of being a very young Vietnamese refugee in the United States. Dam's intervention focused on the idea of silence as a powerful language. His biographical journey allowed him to observe how silence can help us experience higher sensitivity. Being only 4-5 years old at the time his family decided to leave Vietnam, Dam was already struggling to grasp the language as a concept when he had to actively learn English, which was foreign to him. At that moment he had a period of silence. In his memory, this silence became part of his identity and was quite prolific for him in his development both as a person and as an artist. This period of silence forced Dan to learn Silence, to such an extent that he considers it his second language.

Through this language he learned to be much more aware of human interaction, focusing on how people were doing things and on how communication was shaping his and other people's way of living. This learning process shaped his artistic inspirations too.

Dam's first interactions with dance as an art form were a revelation. Dam discovered a whole community that utilised the sensitivity that was so familiar to him as a constant, actively engaging in it and appreciating it as a language form. It was a relief to discover this community. This new awareness was the signal of an identity resonance. Thus, lots of questions about identity started to emerge for Dam: Who am I? Where is my home? Looking for the answers seemed to be part of a journey between boundaries.

But how Silence as a language is reflected in Dam's artistic work? His intimate relationship with silence usually starts from the absence of music in his creative process. Silence creates a platform to conceive directions that can follow any

path, with limitless possibilities. In such a creative environment, where there is no sound, we are not forced or bound by any audio stimulations or audio restrictions. This, of course, might be very difficult for the artists who don't speak the Silence language. However, that really encouraged the fellow artists who share the space to be attuned to one another, to be sensitive in feeling where to go. Clearly, the larger the company, the harder the challenges of this creation process.

Reflecting on his personal history and on the very special relationship he has with silence – while also recalling all the testimonies that were shared in the past few days – Dam closed his contribution with a provocative question:

### **have we lost the silence?**

In developing so many languages and structures, have we lost the ability to interact? Has our language lost its power to share a human interaction? We perhaps imagine language as a way to connect one to another, but looking at the current economic development of most major cities, language now seems to be more and more a tool to position a person economically and socially, alongside being a means to communicate.

It was suggested in the audience that we might have not lost the silence, rather we have been distracted from it, though it might depend on how someone determines what a moment of silence is. More and more we engage in moments of silence by being on social media, reading, listening, reflecting or thinking loudly. However, our society makes it difficult to appreciate the intensity of silence as a practice of being or a practice of stillness, as it offers a deep conversational frontier. John Cage's Four minutes thirty-three seconds provides an example of using silence in order to find more music.

On this final note, Emma Jayne Park and Rita Sala undertook another task by asking everybody in the room to share a distinctive sign of their culture [→Task Box 6].

## **TASK 6: SHARING THE CULTURE**

**Aim:** Change our bodies by sharing the most idiomatic attachment that we have with our language.

**Task:** Invite the audience to meet someone they don't share the language with. Then ask these couples to share a phrase that they feel represents their culture or a detail of their language that makes them feel like they're at home when they hear it. If there are deaf people, ask them to think of a cultural gesture or a physicality that their culture has.

## *Theatre, a language without borders*

Marco Di Stefano, director of La Confraternita del Chianti, introduced Pentateuch, a cycle of five monologues developed between 2014 and 2017. Every chapter is shaped for its actor and each one faces an aspect of migration. Inspired by the first five books of the Bible, not in a secular and religious sense but as a mythical tale of migration to the Promised Land, each monologue has been co-produced with different European partners that shared a particular connection with the main topic of the chapter. The first two monologues - Genesis and Exodus - delve into the topic of language as a boundary. The other monologues - Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy pertain more to the path of the social integration and that formal limit that marks and shapes the identity of an individual.

Co-produced with Dot Spot Media – a Romanian company based in Bucharest that works with theatre, cinema and professional translation – Genesis is a realistic story of a migrant arriving in a foreign country, who must pass a language exam to avoid repatriation. During the production of the monologue, the manuscript was written partially in Italian and partially in Esperanto. The intention was not to talk

about a specific country where the migrant protagonist arrives, but to convey a universal message.

The choice of Esperanto has a double significance. On the one hand, it reflected the original intent of Zamenhof, who decided to create a language that could normalise the communication between people with different linguistic identities without anyone linguistically dominating the other.

On the other hand, Esperanto also had an empathetic function by putting the viewer in the protagonist's shoes (audience inevitably learns some Esperanto during the play, thanks to its simple grammar). Esperanto was particularly suitable, both because it is a grammatically basic language, it is not very well known, and it doesn't have to be translated or culturally converted when the performance is touring abroad. The scenography of the show is a huge blackboard that represents the mind map of the protagonist. At the end of the show, the blackboard is full of drawings and words of the language that the spectators have learned with the actor during the performance.

The second monologue is Exodus. It covers the complex period between 1943 and the early 1950s in the old Italian eastern border. This border has always been a source of great discord, and in Italy the argument is still politicised especially by the extreme right wing. During the Second World War, it was forbidden for the Slavic populations, Croats and Slovenians living in this region, to speak in their own language. Italian was the only language allowed. Forbidding the use of native languages deprived people of their own identity and, consequently, put them under control (see Harold Pinter's piece Mountain Language).

As always, the truth is more complex. In Istria, bilingualism is still guaranteed for the Italian minority living there and in Rijeka (Fiume) there is an Italian-speaking company founded in 1946 within the Croatian national theatre that co-produced Exodus. Historically there has never been a clear division of ethnic groups and languages, but rather everyone could speak any language they preferred, until the fascism times. This

show was meant to bring a different narrative from the Italian government's official version of what happened in Istria during the Italian rule.

The protagonist, Diego Runko, was born in Pula and represents an example of what Istrian and eastern Adriatic cultures are: Diego is an Italian native speaker as his grandfather and father belonged to the Italian community. He also speaks Croatian because he was born and raised in Croatia, and Slovenian, his mother's native language. In Exodus, he speaks all these languages while playing different characters.

Two cues can be taken from these two performances:

- Like ideas, languages have no borders. Identity is less and less linked to a territorial experience, but since it is very much connected to language, to the way we communicate, it is highly complex, even when we try to oversimplify it, by adopting external points of view.
- Preserving one's language and one's identity does not create barriers, while banning other languages, undermining other cultures and diminishing them do. The aim of theatre should be to break down the barriers between humans, safeguarding different identities and cultures.

# Linguistic imperialism

What makes a language a language? How is it different from a dialect, a register, a jargon, an idiolect, if not by the fact that it belongs to the dominant urban class? How can a language break power relations and gain recognition? What can be done to prevent the disappearance of less widely spread languages under the pressure of a dominant one and to sustain a place in which they all co-exist?

## TASK 7: STANDING MY LANGUAGE

**Aim:** Knowing who is in the room, who is sharing the same language and what is linguistic variance.

**Task:** Ask the audience to discuss with the person next to them about which language they would like to learn and why (one minute). Then ask to stand up if the chosen language they mentioned is Mandarin or variation of Chinese. Keep asking this question giving time to the audience to stand up for each language. The other languages should be Spanish, English, Hindi, Arabic, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, German, French, Turkish and Italian.

The second part of this task aims at reflecting on languages that are not usually considered or that are usually taken for granted. Use the following questions:

1. Stand up if the language you mentioned was Sign Language (native or international).  
Please explain why (ask some of the people who stood up).
2. Please stand up if English is your native language.  
Please sit down if you also speak other language(s). Ask the people who are standing how they feel about being an English native speaker not knowing any other language.
3. Please stand up if you speak multiple languages.  
Ask those who stood up how they feel about being multilingual.
4. Please stand up if you predominantly use sign language.  
Please sit down if you have been in a situation over the past two days where you have made an effort to communicate with someone who does not sign and tried to make sure that they don't feel guilty for not being able to communicate.
5. Let participants exchange ideas about this.  
Please stand up if you do not use sign language. Please sit down if you feel comfortable communicating with people from the deaf community.  
Let participants exchange ideas about this.

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## The world's smallest language

In 2010, an 87-year-old man called William Rozario died in the state of Kerala, southern India, and with him Creole of Cochin died, a language that emerged out of the Portuguese voyages to the East in the 15th century. Like so many other languages, Creole of Cochin was a hybrid language, the result of the coming together of people from different cultures looking for ways to talk, negotiate, learn, threat, convey, share, create, lie and love. A language, like a bridge, connects different places. That bridge was used for 500 years and crossed by hundreds of thousands of people. William Rozario grew up speaking and listening to Creole of Cochin. It was the language spoken both at home and on the street. But other languages gained their importance, especially English. In 2010, William was the last person in the world who still mastered Creole of Cochin. After his death, the language fell silent.

This is not an unusual occurrence. Statistically, every two weeks a minority language disappears, and about 2.500 languages are on the verge of extinction. According to UNESCO, there are over 6.000 languages around the world. However, 97% of the world's population speak only 4% of the world's languages. In the same way, as endangered species such as the Siberian tiger, the Sumatran orang-utan and the Amazon river dolphin, these languages have lost not only their population but also territory, migration routes, sustenance, genetic diversity and the ability to evolve. By the end of this century, the vast majority of the languages and animals that exist today will no longer be around, except in recordings, books, souvenirs, zoos and museums. The world will be more monotone and monochrome.

Approximately two years ago, Materials Diversos Festival [see the presentation of the festival by Elisabete Paiva during the [IETM Satellite Meeting in Wales](#)] invited Paula Diogo and Alex Cassal to create a play based on Portuguese minority languages, which are limited to small regions and communities in the country, and spoken by fewer and fewer people.

The idea was to spend some time in some of those regions and communities in contact with those who speak Minderico, Barranquenho or Mirandês: a sort of fieldwork, an ethnographic gathering of impressions, habits and remains. Neither Alex nor Paula are linguists, anthropologists or sociologists. They work in theatre, undertaking projects within the very broad spectrum of the performing arts. These projects are very different in terms of practices and results, however, they all share the desire to encourage encounters: to find out what happens when we are placed in front of someone other than us, or when we visit a place we are not familiar with.

The project is called The World's Smallest Language, and so far we know very little about its results. The first residency will take place at the end of May 2019 in Barrancos, a village at the border with Spain. In this village people still speak Barranquenho, a dialect that originates from both the Portuguese and Spanish languages. Then it will move to Miranda do Douro, a region surrounded by mountain ranges and rivers, where Mirandês, Portugal's second official language, is spoken. Experts say the region's geographic isolation allowed the language to develop for hundreds of years, moving from oral tradition to writing. And finally, Paula and Alex will be in Minde, where the performance is going to premiere (the position of the three places is displayed in the image on the left). It is the land of Minderico, a dialect spoken by weavers and sellers of blankets in the region. In 2017, only 24 people were identified as being fluent in Minderico, the youngest of them being 45 years old. They are the ones who will give the artists the directions that will shape the performance.

Paula is Portuguese of Angolan descent. Alex is Brazilian. Their language is the same, as much as it could be. However, their accents, slangs, references and training are different. Three actresses coming from different places will also join the production. Sílvia Felipe is Portuguese and has a long career spanning theatre, film, TV and opera. Zia Soares is Angolan and she runs a company, Griot, which works with artists and issues of African origin. Bibi



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Dória is a young Brazilian artist operating at the intersection between dance and performance. These creators have all worked with a wide range of backgrounds, processes and languages. They carry their culture as travellers carry their belongings in bags and baskets, in wagons or on their backs, jumbled stuff coming from far away. Some parts have been lost, exchanged, spent and forgotten along the way. Their creative approach is not the one of explorers or colonisers, but rather the one of nomads.

Speech comes from dialogue, not from monologue. In order to speak, we need other people to listen to us. William Rozario was indeed the last person to speak Creole of Cochin before dying in 2010. But a few years earlier his neighbour Francis Paynter, who also grew up and lived listening to and speaking Creole of Cochin, had died. After his neighbour's death, William never used Creole of Cochin to talk to someone. And at that moment, years before his death, his language ceased to have a reason to exist.

The reading of the world precedes the reading of the word.

This quote from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is connected to his teaching method, based on students' experiences, on their individuality and personal views. He applied his technique for the first time to teach literacy to a group of workers from a sugar cane plantation over 50 years ago. His method has since turned into a world reference in the field of education. The method allowed students to create their own way of following education, treading their own path, and not following a pre-existing one. But in the eyes of the current president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, Paulo Freire was a vicious communist who should be erased from Brazilian history. Dictators fear words they can't control, thus they fear other ways of learning, individual critical thinking and minority languages. Dictatorship values the strength of a language to silence others [→ Marco Di Stefano's contribution]. They long for the silence of extinction, for a monotone, monochrome world.

To use the words taken from *The Emancipated Spectator*, by Jacques Rancière: "The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is, in fact, a community of storytellers and translators."

### *Debating on minority languages*

Before wrapping up the session, Emma and Rita invited the audience to reflect on the topic of linguistic minorities [→Task Box 8].

Some of the points brought up during the exercise:

- When we move around the world, we adapt to new realities and change, but when it comes to languages we don't abandon the old in order to create something new. New languages are not created, as they are not needed; the linguistic diversity narrows down

## TASK 8: SAVE MINORITY LANGUAGES

**Aim:** Think about less widely spread languages and what can be done to prevent their disappearance.

**Task:** Make the audience move into groups of native language speakers. Then establish a hierarchy of languages in the room by asking the groups to position themselves on an imaginary power continuum going from the right side of the room (languages holding more power) to the left side of the room (languages holding less power). Then make the audience reflect by asking the following question:

What can you do to prevent the disappearance of less widely spread languages under the pressure of dominant ones and sustain a place in which they all co-exist?

Ask groups to reflect on the question independently for about 20 minutes and then share their thoughts with the rest of the audience.

in favour of dominant languages. New nationalities or professions that require a specific language are not emerging.

- International recognition of languages can play a substantial role. For example, everybody who speaks Irish speaks English, so there is no urge to use Irish in official discourses. However, within the European Union, Irish people have the right to have a translator or have a document translated in Irish. Having more languages recognised internationally can make a difference for language diversity.
- Speaking about the mainstream languages, in terms of numbers and political and economic power, Italian is a minority language. But from a cultural point of view, Italian plays an important role: many people want to learn Italian for cultural reasons (thinking of opera, it is mostly in Italian; many music terms come from Italian – forte, piano, etc.), more than for economic ones. If we empower minorities' art and bring it to the world, it may be a way to save their languages from extinction.
- In some situations, such as the Portuguese one, the power of the language is not located in its economic role, but in the number of speakers, thanks also to Brazil. Another motive might be the social class. For a long time, learning French was preferred over learning English because it was considered as the highest class' language. Therefore, those who studied French used to be at the powerful end of the line, while now they might find themselves closer to the minority languages' pole.

# Aesthetic as a language

The question of aesthetic is very much framed within a certain political, social and cultural reality, as well as a historical perspective that adds a layer of complexity to it. Aesthetic can be described as the language of an artist, expressing the artist's self-representation and understanding of the world. Can one understand performing arts without understanding the performer's language, be it spoken, signed or physical? What are the codes to access, master and own the arts? What are the paradigms of the aesthetics of contemporary performing arts, and what do they say about power relations in our culture? What would it take for us to rethink our canons and our metrics of quality and open up to other aesthetics and languages?



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## TASK 9: AESTHETICS IN PERFORMING ARTS

Aim: Reflect on the aesthetics of contemporary performing arts.

Room layout: Semi-circular groups around the room.

Task: This activity lasts approximately one hour. Divide the audience into smaller groups (8-10 people each) and give them the following 3 tasks every 10/15 minutes:

1. Brainstorm on the word "aesthetics" in contemporary performing arts, writing down every concept you could think of in relation to it on large sheets of paper. It could be any type of performances.
2. What qualities can these aesthetics have? List them on individual post-it notes. One word per post-it. One word per performance type (e.g. Circus – fire; theatre – narrative; Circus - colours)
3. Establish a hierarchy of these qualities based on social groups, types of audiences or other criteria of your choice. Examples:  
What are the most easily understood qualities?  
What are the most popular qualities among audiences?  
What qualities are most valued by programmers?

Let the groups talk for 20 minutes, then invite them to decide on a way in which they can change the hierarchy they identified when reflecting on the above questions and share it with the rest of participants.

## *Aesthetics, content and tradition*

Aesthetics is a very complex topic. Ahmed El Attar wears different hats, being an artist but also a programmer and a festival director, and in his experience, the more we think of aesthetics and the more we think of content, the more we are losing the magic, the mystery of the process. We usually don't start a work knowing or deciding where it is going to end. We start a work with an idea, a story, or an image of a space. We want to do a play about something, that's our starting point, but that's as far as it goes. From there, the whole progression of discovery starts, passing through the creative process and ending up finding the final destination. According to Ahmed, the risk of thinking about aesthetics, content, audience in the process is making artists restricted in their work, whereas during the working process all these elements will eventually come in, but more naturally.

What we go through as artists in our lives determine our aesthetics: where we were raised, what cultures we have been exposed to, what relationship we have with our own culture and with other cultures. All of these compose what we want to speak about in our artistic work and how we are going to present it – form, content, aesthetics, topics. Ahmed believes there is a trick: the more we try to envisage our work intellectually, the less important it becomes, because the artistic process is rather organic, it's more informed by the artist's desire or sometimes fear to create and to cross boundaries. For southern and Arab artists, a lot of the reflection is about the form. People might be questioning any artistic choice from different points of view, asking, for example, why an artist from Egypt presents contemporary theatre, or vice versa, why an Egyptian artist doesn't use traditional forms.

This understanding of aesthetics is valid for the entire process. As a programmer, Ahmed functions in the same way. Of course, programming a festival in Cairo is different than doing it in Italy. There are red lights, but they are not related to aesthetics,



My version of the last supper – from the presentation of Ahmed El Attar

but rather to certain social norms that you have to follow to avoid your festival being banned or closed after one session, or even to avoid going to jail. At the end of the day, your choices are not necessarily informed by the aesthetics of your culture or of the place where the performance is presented, because otherwise you either run into a struggle with that aesthetic, or you fall into convention.

Finally, can the audience read an aesthetic that is foreign to them even if they don't understand the language? Audiences are more perceptive than we usually think and are willing to venture into new territories provided that we do not make them feel obliged. Obligated to understand. Obligated to like. We cannot pressure our audiences to admire a certain artistic aesthetic as being the only aesthetic of the day and expect them to willingly go along with it. Audiences need to find their way and pace of digging into the unknown.

### *To sign or not to sign?*

This was not an easy question for the theatre-maker Ramesh Meyyappan. He is deaf, and sign language is his language. Ramesh claims to represent deaf people and to raise awareness about the deaf

through his work. However, he chose not to sign in his work.

As performers we have a unique opportunity to put ourselves on stage, to bare our souls, to show people who we are. We share our thoughts, our concerns, our pure and honest emotion, and yet Ramesh appears to deliberately deny the opportunity to do this using his first language, sign language. Why not signing? Because sign language is not Ramesh's natural 'theatrical language'.

Growing up and watching theatre, unable to hear the spoken word that was on stage, he learned to pick up on the visual, movements and physicality that gave meaning to what he was watching. That was theatre to him. An intention or a thought was seen rather than heard. He focused on visually receiving those thoughts and he realised that sign language in that context is not the theatrical language. From the audience perspective, watching an interpreter at the side of the stage means losing all the connection with the stage and simply watching the interpreter. Therefore, we miss everything else that is theatre.

The basic function of any language is to facilitate communication, and this is the same for any theatrical language: to communicate. Having participated in a number of international deaf theatre festivals, Ramesh has often found himself sitting in the audience completely confused and struggling to understand the native sign language, feeling alienated and frustrated by that. Any notion of the captive beauty of sign language was lost for him, and it was imperative to just understand the narrative shared by the characters on stage.

One could argue that during such festivals, with so many attendees, it should be anticipated that a range of native sign languages from various countries will be converging on stage. For many deaf theatre companies, such festivals and international tours make up a large proportion of their performance calendar. But how much of these performances are accessible to the deaf communities from other countries? Why perform on an international or any stage if we are not going to be understood? Theatre is about communication and that communication is most effective when people understand it.

Ramesh believes it is necessary to continually extend his visual theatre vocabulary, which could be shared among artists and the audience, so that more people can understand what is going on stage. In the early stages of his career, Ramesh and his collaborators had to explore, to find the language of the piece, define the vocabulary. This collaboration between hearing people and deaf people made them consider languages, cultures, skills and experiences of each other and bring them together. Through the process of creating the language shared among hearing and deaf people, Ramesh could represent his deaf community.

Of course, Ramesh's experience doesn't advocate the abandonment of sign language on stage. Sign language is deaf people's true voice, their first language. However, he advocates a future where sign language is part of a shared theatrical vocabulary, theatrical language. And that will only happen with more deaf voices on stage, sign language being 'commonplace' within the theatre environment. Otherwise, sign language on stage will always be seen as 'nice' by people who don't understand what has been said, leading them to say, very patronisingly: "How beautiful it is!". But is it really beautiful? The beauty should be conveyed by how eloquently or honestly a meaning/intention/emotion has been communicated and not because something 'looks nice'. It should be beautiful because of how the thought was expressed, the real truth of the meaning.

### FINAL WORD BY ÁSA RICHARDSDÓTTIR, IETM SECRETARY GENERAL

The Milan meeting was a discovery for me, as a human being, as performing arts professional, as a white Nordic hearing woman.

In particular, it was a learning experience to get to know the realities of deaf people and richness of the world of sign languages.

A world without the contributions of deaf people is a poorer world. Official legal recognition of sign languages is a key human right. Yet, as we heard, numerous countries around the world have not legally recognised local sign languages, including some European countries. Our host country for the meeting, Italy, is one of them.

The barriers, injustices and prejudice deaf people still face, every day around the world, are totally intolerable. And so unnecessary. A world that nourishes exclusion, when it can embrace and benefit from inclusion, is an ignorant world. The Milan meeting made me realise the beauty of sign languages, the magic of the "silent world" and how easily we can understand each other if we only let go of our preconceived ideas of how human interaction actually happens.

Milan was the second of three meetings IETM is organising, in 2019, on the topic of inclusion. Our focus on inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in the last few years has proven to be important for our large global membership and has inspired hundreds of performing arts professional to think differently, examine their own practices and change views and behaviours.

I thank the Milan organisers and local supporters for the initiative of the IETM Milan Satellite and look forward to future collaborations.