

Flemish Sign Language (VGT)* unanimously recognised

On 26th April 2006 the Flemish Parliament unanimously voted the recognition of the Flemish Sign Language (VGT). Over 300 deaf and hearing people were present during this historical event at the parliament.

The struggle for the recognition of VGT has been conducted for years. Because of the political complexity of language laws in Belgium, it turned out to be a fierce struggle. During years of lobbying the Federation of Flemish Deaf Organisations (Fevlado) did accomplish a certain sensitization of the larger society. As a consequence deaf people in Flanders already profit from the implicit acceptance of VGT. Deaf persons get a limited amount of interpreting hours financed by the government, some services are accessible through sign language and some deaf schools use VGT in the education of deaf children.

In 2004 the actions concerning the recognition of VGT happened in quick succession. First of all Deaf member of Flemish Parliament, Helga Stevens, put the recognition of the sign language of 10000 Flemish citizens* on her electoral programme.

During the electoral campaign of 2004 Fevlado contacted all democratic political parties in Flanders asking their support for the recognition of VGT. All parties responded positive.

At the end of 2004 a group of young deaf and hearing friends established Deaf Action Front (DAF). Their first accomplishment was a very successful petition asking the recognition of VGT. Over 70000 Flemish citizens signed and supported this demand.

In response, Helga Stevens started to work on a proposal of decree concerning the recognition of Flemish Sign Language. Together with four other members of parliament this proposal was motioned in the Flemish Parliament.

The decree asks a cultural recognition of VGT as the first or preferred language of the Deaf community in Flanders. Consequently the Flemish government will form a committee of experts advising the government concerning policies related to Flemish Sign Language. Additionally a new centre will be established stimulating research on VGT.

On 26th of April the Flemish Parliament expressed its commitment to this decree when it voted unanimously in favour of the recognition of Flemish Sign Language.

During his speech the minister of Culture, Bert Anciaux, made it clear that it is the intention of the Flemish Parliament to respect the cultural identity and language of the Deaf community in Flanders. Being the proper authority he expressed the wish to implement the cultural recognition into concrete actions.

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* Flemish Sign Language is the language used in the Deaf community in Flanders. Flanders is the northern part of Belgium.

* About 6000 Deaf people in Flanders have Sign Language as their first or preferred language. On the other hand there is a large group of hearing people who also use sign language in their communication with Deaf people (family members, friends, interpreters...).