

# Open letter

Translation into International Sign: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXFwEabB9lc>

Demand for ethical and professional reappraisal of the research project "Die große Dolmetscherumfrage 2022" ("The Great Interpreter Survey 2022") of the Forschungsstelle Leichte Sprache (Research Center for Plain Language), University of Hildesheim clarification and reappraisal of the above-mentioned questions with the involvement of Deaf researchers has taken place.

*This letter was prepared by Deaf experts, Deaf activists, interpreters for German Sign Language and German spoken language, as well as researchers, scientists, association representatives and allies.*

Dear Laura Maaß, dear Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Christiane Maaß, dear Ethics Committee of the University of Hildesheim under the direction of Prof. Dr. Peter Cloos, Prof. Dr. phil. Andreas Mojzisch, Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Christiane Maaß, Prof. Dr. Athanassios Pitsoulis and dear President of the University of Hildesheim, Prof. Dr. May-Britt Kallenrode, dear Prof. Dr. Silvia Hansen-Schirra of the University of Mainz,

in September 2022, the Forschungsstelle Leichte Sprache (Research Center for Plain Language) at the University of Hildesheim, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Christiane Maaß and Laura Maaß (née Schwengber), launched the online survey "Die große Dolmetscherumfrage 2022" ("The Great Interpreter Survey 2022"). In this project, according to the website (<https://www.gebaerdensprachdolmetscher.de/inhalt-der-studie.html>) (2023/01/05, 1:00 PM), "the cooperation between hearing sign language interpreters and deaf sign language users" is to be investigated. It also represents Laura Maaß's PhD project, which was submitted on Jan. 17, 2023, according to Instagram and Twitter posts.

We welcome the fact that the topics of Deaf Communities, Deaf Culture, Sign Languages and also the research on Sign Language Interpreting continue to come into the focus of research and the public. Unfortunately, the desiderata in research are still numerous. Similar to Disability Studies or Postcolonial Studies, we are dealing with a vulnerable group here, which is why this research requires sensitivity to a special degree, an attentive handling of power relations and the privileges that go along with them, as well as having to absolutely follow ethical guidelines of professional scientific work. This has not been the case with regard to the research project mentioned.

In the context of the research project, numerous inconsistencies in the research design can be identified. We have ethical concerns about the approach and methodology. In particular, when conducting this online survey with a vulnerable and marginalized group that experiences discrimination at all levels and exclusions in everyday life, this research design creates another barrier by creating non-participatory framework conditions by researchers.

In this research project, Deaf people were once again made the object of research about them, instead of - as would be appropriate and timely - conducting the project together with them. In this context, research on an equal footing means not to objectify Deaf people, but to conduct research on an equal footing that actually ensures valid results from which Deaf communities can benefit.

Since the ethics committee of the University of Hildesheim has insufficiently responded to the complaint and the available arguments despite demand, we feel compelled to present our point of view in an open letter:

- The research project is public and the addressees are Deaf people. Therefore, it is to be expected that the addressed communities will also speak up and refer to it. However, the survey leaves open from the beginning whether and if so, at which point complaints can also be submitted in German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache, DGS). This is imperative because the target group of the survey communicates predominantly in German Sign Language and the survey should therefore also be designed in this language.
- Even if a complaint in German Sign Language would be possible, we additionally wonder how objectivity and neutrality will be maintained when reviewing the complaints. The reason being that Prof. Dr. Christiane Maaß, a member from the ethics committee of the University of Hildesheim (<https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/organe-und-gremien/senat/kommissionen/ethikkommission/> 2023/02/07, 8:30 PM), leads the research project, which the committee is to judge. In this case, it was not made transparent how our complaint was discussed, which persons were present and what involvement Prof. Dr. Christiane Maaß had in evaluating our complaint.

It is with great concern that we observe that researchers at the University of Hildesheim do not seem to address the responsibilities that come with participatory research ethics (see Hale & Napier, 2013 and Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participation in research results as well as participatory research have always been demanded by researched marginalized groups and are currently advancing to a common standard in other research projects in Germany, such as "Geschlechtergerechte Sprache und Genus in der Deutschen Gebärdensprache: Eine theoretische Bestandsaufnahme" ("Gender-equitable language and genre in German Sign Language: a theoretical review") by Maria Kopf (2022).

Methodological-critical reflection on the consequences of one's own research and

one's own position within one's own research projects is also taken for granted nowadays. Reflection has not occurred despite multiple notices from the deaf communities. However, at times, as can be clearly seen in the case of the "Great Interpreter Survey 2022", morality in science falls by the wayside.

Accordingly, we address several key issues in our further remarks: on the one hand, the ethical aspects of participation research, as well as the insufficient implementation of accessibility of the research project for the researched group from the perspective of the Deaf signatories.

## **1. insufficient active participation research**

At the beginning of the survey, the homepage referred to a cooperation with the Deutscher Gehörlosen-Bund e. V. (German Association of the Deaf, DGB). However, no such form of cooperation with the DGB and individual deaf persons mentioned in the research project has taken place. Deaf people and allies have pointed out that the statement about "cooperation" does not correspond to reality and have asked for correction. The Deutsche Gehörlosen- Bund e.V. had also insisted that this statement be corrected. This "correction" did not take place promptly after the first complaints and, moreover, only in the form of an Instagram post, which read "The Deaf Association did not continue to participate in the project. The Federal Association of Sign Language Interpreters continued to support the project" (source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkjJoPhqqIq/>, 2023/01/17, 4:36 PM). In this time further data could be collected on-line, so that the Deaf Communities (which was the object of this research!) continued to get the wrong impression that the DGB as a representative organization for the Deaf and sign language users in Germany supports the project and that Deaf people were included here as equal partners into the research.

From this delay and the kind of the correction that took place the following questions arise:

1. Why were Deaf researchers and Deaf people not involved in the research and part of this survey from the beginning?
2. Why was there no timely clarification of the role of the DGB and the alleged Deaf employees (their names were removed almost simultaneously)?
3. Why was there no correction in German Sign Language?
4. Why was the correction not communicated everywhere, but only in an Instagram post. Thus, the homepage of the survey still says: "The study is made by Laura M. Schwengber and Professor Christiane Maaß from the Department of Accessible Communication at the University of Hildesheim in cooperation with the German Federation of the Deaf (DGB) e.V. (...)" (Source:

<https://www.gebaerdensprachdolmetscher.de/wer-forscht.html> (2023/02/07, 8:30 PM).

5. Why was it not explained exactly what the cooperation entailed and why it was terminated?
6. Lastly, we wonder why a co-operation with the German Association of the Deaf is claimed, although the DGB did not agree from the outset, and as such cannot be terminated "after"?

This form of dealing is neither appropriate for an ethical procedure in the research process nor towards the Deutscher Gehörlosen-Bund e.V. (German Association of the Deaf).

"Disability Studies does not research ABOUT, but WITH people with disabilities, by exploring questions of social participation with them and in view of their lived experiences. Thus, people with disabilities are included as active subjects instead of being in the position of researched passive objects as in traditional research on disability." (Köbsell 2019, p. 9). In the mentioned research project of the University of Hildesheim, we do not see sufficient participation research involving Deaf expertise and associations from the beginning and in all areas and steps. What exactly participation means is not up to the interpretation sovereignty of the researchers. Those involved in the project "The Great Interpreter Survey" must not shirk their responsibility and completely ignore modern research approaches and discriminatory structures. In terms of research ethics, a clear social positioning of the two researchers is also necessary: they are hearing, their first language is German and they are academically educated, among other privileged positions. The research project at the University of Hildesheim obviously did not succeed in dealing with these privileges in a responsible way.

## **2. accessibility**

The survey that was part of the project was not designed to be accessible, as it was only available in written form. The survey was about deaf people who communicate in German Sign Language. Due to experienced historical discrimination and language deprivation, it cannot be assumed that Deaf people in general have comprehensive written language competence and thus have full access to the survey. Accessible information for Deaf people primarily means access to information in a sign language, their natural language (see Bundesfachstelle Barrierefreiheit, [https://www.bundesfachstelle-barrierefreiheit.de/DE/Fachwissen/Information-und-Kommunikation/Gebaerdensprache/gebaerdensprache\\_node.html](https://www.bundesfachstelle-barrierefreiheit.de/DE/Fachwissen/Information-und-Kommunikation/Gebaerdensprache/gebaerdensprache_node.html) (2023/02/07, 8:30 PM)).

It is therefore to be welcomed that a Deaf interpreter was used for the research portal. However, we are very surprised that the sign language materials were

limited only to the introduction to the survey. In contrast, no sign language translation was provided for the survey itself, making it difficult for Deaf people to participate in the survey, even though the survey was explicitly aimed at this target group. The presentation and wording of the questions also made it additionally difficult to follow the survey without good written language skills. This represents a major disadvantage for the group being researched.

When asked by a participant on social media whether the questionnaire would also be offered in DGS, the researcher replied that efforts had been made to formulate the questionnaire as comprehensibly as possible. Also, the researcher offered an appointment for a joint completion in a video conference appointment of the software Zoom, in which the questions would be presented in DGS and participants could select the answers on their cell phones. This meant an acceptance of non-controlled and possibly deviant translations resulting in improper research methodology which does not do the requirements of such work justice. In addition, it must be noted here that accessibility played a subordinate role in the survey. Instead, barriers were initially erected, which were then to be retroactively removed in each individual case upon request. This procedure would still have been understandable to a certain extent if technical solutions were not available or if the knowledge of DGS as the first language of deaf people was not known to the researchers. However, this is not the case.

This cannot be due to technical and content-related difficulties, because there are already numerous best practice examples of surveys that were designed in German Sign Language and enabled deaf people to participate without barriers. Another illustrative example is the work of Johannes Till Höcker (2010) "Sozialmedizinische Aspekte der medizinischen Versorgung gehörlosen Menschen in Deutschland" (<https://openscience.ub.uni-mainz.de/handle/20.500.12030/1008>, 07.02.2023, 20:30), in the abstract it is stated that a quantitative online questionnaire with sign language videos was developed, likewise in the past in several research projects meticulous attention was already paid to participation of Deafblind people. For this reason, we are more than surprised that academics from the Master's program "Accessible Communication" do not see themselves in a position to design a research design for Deaf people in an equal and accessible way from the beginning. For research projects on accessible communication, accessibility in communication should actually be a matter of course! However, the survey is hardly designed accessible for deaf people. When interested deaf participants inquired about accessibility, they were told that "comprehensible" formulations were intentionally chosen, because answers would be needed in writing for the scientific evaluation. This was then used to justify the procedure that in individual cases it would be possible to convey the questions in DGS. This is by no means accessibility!

How is it that accessibility and the associated laws are taught (UN-BRK, BGG, BITV 2.0, etc.), but not applied in the research project itself? The mode of operation and reactions to queries from communities show who claims the sovereignty of interpretation in matters of accessibility for themselves. The fact that Deaf people have to turn to researchers when they have issues understanding a survey about their own needs and concerns is scandalous in two respects:

- Researchers in the field of accessibility are unable to turn legal frameworks and theoretical approaches to accessibility into practice. In view of these serious omissions, we wonder whether these deficiencies show not only in the survey, but also in the curriculum of the study program itself. This touches on quality requirements in the design of the study program, which should not be ignored by the management of the University of Hildesheim.
- The lack of accessibility was justified by the fact that data for the scientific evaluation would be required in writing. This sends the message that formal requirements of science take precedence over barrier-free access! Moreover, this does not correspond to the facts; there are already numerous examples of research projects mentioned, such as the De-Sign Bilingual Project (<https://designbilingual.univie.ac.at/index.php>, 07.02.2023, 20:30), which have implemented sign language data collection. Moreover, any sign language can be transferred to written form.

Above all, that a university, specifically one committed to "Accessible Communication", offers a related master's program, implements only a minimum of accessibility for Deaf participants is more than disappointing. This group is the focus of the research project. Moreover, the university does not correct or reflect accordingly in case of critical indications. This, however should be a standard and not least intrinsic requirement for a project in this subject matter. The lack of willingness to learn and lack of self-reflection are a slap in the face of all who have to struggle day in and day out with the barriers that this survey claims to want to capture. The criticism of deaf people about the serious omissions of the survey must be taken seriously and the whole matter must be dealt with appropriately, i.e. in an accessible way, communicatively speaking.

In addition to these two focal points of our criticism, there are other omissions that we would also like to point out:

As already touched upon above with regard to ethical issues, it should also be noted that it is questionable in terms of data protection law if the survey is designed in such a way that Deaf participants cannot answer it alone. All participants are assured anonymity, but in the case of Deaf people, this standard does not seem to be required. The fact that the assured anonymity does not apply to everyone is not made transparent. In this respect, researchers have also failed to take responsibility and precautions under data protection law.

The research situation on the topics of sign languages, Deaf communities and sign language interpreting may still be unsatisfactory in many respects in the German-speaking world. However, there is extensive professional literature - both German-language and international publications - on the subject of client satisfaction, the relationship between Deaf clients and sign language interpreters, as well as on many other professional topics.

With regard to "The Great Interpreter Survey 2022", the impression arises that this research takes place detached from the scientific discourse: Relevant institutes were not involved: neither nationally nor internationally. No reference was made to high-profile researchers and their published work. Furthermore, we miss the consideration of basic professional knowledge.

The researchers write about the use of "Leichte Sprache Plus" ("Easy Language Plus") in their survey "This form of Easy Language Plus is similar to German Sign Language" (source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkjJoPhqqIg/>, 2023/02/07, 8:30 PM). The two hearing researchers represent this audist assumption, although it contradicts professional points of view. This is a discriminatory statement that contradicts the definition of DGS (see [https://www.bundesfachstelle-barrierefreiheit.de/DE/Fachwissen/Information-und-Kommunikation/Gebaerdensprache/gebaerdensprache\\_node.html](https://www.bundesfachstelle-barrierefreiheit.de/DE/Fachwissen/Information-und-Kommunikation/Gebaerdensprache/gebaerdensprache_node.html), 07.02.2023, 08:30 PM and <https://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/studium/studiengaenge/ba-studiengaenge/gebaerdensprachen.html>, 2023/02/07, 8:30 PM). In addition, the comparison of "Leichte Sprache Plus" and German Sign Language did not cite any scientific evidence, which is why it is a violation of the professional criteria. Furthermore, the scientific criterion of not taking note of already existing knowledge of a marginalized community is violated, which is why professional and ethical dishonesty can be assumed. After publication of the work, it will be necessary to examine how scientifically sound and meaningful the submitted work will be in view of the serious qualitative deficiencies.

Research on structurally disadvantaged people always requires critical reflection on one's own actions, especially when the research perpetuates and reinforces one's own positions of power. Despite indications from deaf communities, in personal conversations and also after reports to the ethics committee of the University of Hildesheim, such a reflection was not recognizably carried out in the present research project. Rather, the research is continued under exclusion of the marginalized vulnerable group to be researched. Instead it is stated that the implementation is always correct and in accordance with the research ethos, which is in complete contradiction to the criticism.

Here we ask ourselves: can the research goal of improving a collaboration with interpreters be achieved if in the design of the survey several ethical codes and the most basic professional content are already questioned? How is the goal to be

achieved if the researcher claims authority and critical comments from Deaf people are not addressed? Can the validity of the results be guaranteed if Deaf people are excluded from the research? Our unequivocal verdict: No!

We demand:

- A transparent, independent and ethical review of the research project by the ethics committee, without the participation of persons involved in the project but with the participation of deaf scientists.
- Clear strategies for naming and avoiding abuse of power as well as a clear classification of power-critical aspects on the part of the researchers.
- No data collection on accessible communication without active participation of Deaf people.
- No culturally sensitive topic treatments without participation of Deaf people in order to avoid cultural appropriation
- An explanation of why accessibility was omitted, as this leads to the exclusion of people from the vulnerable group and thus also relativizes and marginalizes political demands from Deaf communities.
- A self-critical reflection in the study program "Accessible Communication" that this research project contributes to exclusions as well as a publication of this self-critical reflection and public apology on the part of the researchers in German Sign Language.
- To delete the data collected under false pretense.
- To reject the data collected and evaluated so far because of the methodological deficiencies, at least to evaluate them as insufficient.

It would be good for the researchers to learn from their own mistakes, not to contribute to the discrimination of others, but to stand in solidarity with them! This is indispensable, especially in courses of study such as Accessible Communication and the Research Center for Easy Language. It is to be hoped that this will also be recognized by those responsible at the University of Hildesheim.

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