

## THE LANGUAGE OF SIGNS: SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES

### LA LINGUA DEI SEGNI: APPROCCIO SOCIO-ANTROPOLOGICO

**Anna Chiara Stellato**<sup>1</sup>

University of Naples "Parthenope"  
[anna.chiara.stellato@gmail.com](mailto:anna.chiara.stellato@gmail.com)

**Alessandro Daniele**

University of Naples "Parthenope"  
[aledan83@gmail.com](mailto:aledan83@gmail.com)

**Domenico Tafuri**

University of Naples "Parthenope"  
[domenico.tafuri@uniparthenope.it](mailto:domenico.tafuri@uniparthenope.it)

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this contribution is to illustrate the general characteristics of sign language as a communicative system that exploits the visual-gestural channel. Since each sign language has its own basic identity, the focus is on Italian sign language (LIS). It then analyzes the method of learning/teaching sign language; In particular, it illustrates the CounseLis method and an online teaching/learning experience that the CounseLis school has developed during the pandemic due to the spread of Sars cov2.

Lo scopo del presente contributo è quello di illustrare le caratteristiche generali della lingua dei segni come sistema comunicativo che sfrutta il canale visivo-gestuale. Poiché ogni lingua dei segni ha una sua identità di base, ci si sofferma in particolare sulla lingua dei segni italiana (LIS). Si analizza poi il metodo di apprendimento/ insegnamento della lingua dei segni; in particolare si illustra il metodo CounseLis e un'esperienza di insegnamento/apprendimento online che la scuola CounseLis ha sviluppato in occasione della pandemia dovuta alla diffusione della Sars Cov2.

**Keywords:** Sign language; Italian sign language; CounseLis method;

**Parole chiave:** : Lingua dei segni; Lingua dei segni italiana; metodo CounseLis

#### **1. The language of signs**

Sign language (LS) is a communicative system that uses the visual-gestural channel. The existence of this language therefore demonstrates that man, in order to achieve this innate disposition, is able to develop alternative means of natural expression when the vocal language becomes inaccessible. The matter of the expression of marked languages consists of a gestural semiosis that can be found both in the deaf and hearing impaired during the early stages of language acquisition, i.e. starting from the first twenty months of life. In this first period of life, hearing subjects indiscriminately use gestures and vocalizations that prepare for the actual linguistic phase, which will then see the development of the code to which the child is actually exposed. In hearing subjects, gestures change and, within their linguistic code, evolve into a

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<sup>1</sup> Tutti gli autori hanno partecipato in modo uguale alla scrittura dell'articolo

multimodal system in which they co-occur with the spoken language. The deaf child, on the other hand, exposed from birth to a sign language, develops a progressive shift from a gestural and a- systematic prelinguistic system to a “complete” semiotic system whose signs are systematic and conventional. This consideration therefore makes evident the fact that sign language is a natural language because it arises from the deaf 's disposition to signify the world starting from the semiotic material that is most innate to them: signs. The gestural matter is systematized and codified in linguistic forms through a selection of traits that each signer makes starting from the practical-perceptive experience that he/she shares with his peers, giving rise to a real code that is natural and at the same time conventional and arbitrary, since the traits are selected from the relationship that the signers establish from time to time between the different meanings and the different signifiers of the language. The visibly iconic character of this language means that it has always been accompanied by the prejudice of its presumed non-linguistic nature and that it is sometimes even compared to forms of pantomime or, more generally, to forms of non-verbal communication. However, this does not mean that even the deaf sometimes resorts to non-verbal communication, that is, the non-linguistic use of the body, using the proper gestures to communicate interpersonal attitudes, emotional states to integrate and support communication. Sign language is defined to all intents and purposes as a historical-natural language, as it evolves over time in parallel with the linguistic community of reference: the deaf are inserted in a constantly evolving geographical, social and cultural context. Even sign language, like all vocal languages, has variations both in the diachronic and in the diatopic dimensions. Sign languages attested in the world show a strong variability both from the point of view of the number of signers, and from the point of view of standardization, because, being oral languages, they lack a form of writing that facilitates this process; moreover, while for vocal languages, thanks to schooling, a variety recognized by the community as a standard language has established itself, while sign languages are subject to slow and poor standardization and present numerous differences even within the same country of reference. At the same time, it is precisely the diatopic differences that create specific conditions of the marked languages: deaf subjects, with different geographical origins, in contact for a relatively short period of time, are able to reach levels of inter-understanding higher than those achieved by speakers of different vocal languages , if placed in the same conditions. This possibility of understanding seems to be in direct correlation with the predominantly iconic nature of marked languages, that is, the possibility of establishing relationships of similarity between the signifier and its meaning. This characteristic is central in these languages even if it has been seen as a sort of pantomime residue; so much so that only in the sixties of the last century thanks to the studies of the American linguist, William Stokoe, they were recognized the status of language. Linguistic studies have shown how the iconic structure is a characteristic feature of the grammars of these languages that integrate aspects of semantic motivation with others of an arbitrary nature. The first to strongly emphasize iconicity was Paul Jouson, linguist and educator of deaf children, who investigated and highlighted the impact that gestural matter has on the processes of signification implemented by deaf subjects. Stokoe in the 1960s conducted a comparative study between the American vocal language and the American Sign Language (ASL), identifying in the latter a structure in many ways similar to the first: as from the combination of a small number of meaningless sounds - phonemes create an infinite number of units endowed with meaning, so from the combination of a small number of minimal units - the cheric- an infinite number of units endowed with meaning can be produced in sign languages. The types of cheric that the American linguist identifies are initially four: the configuration (i.e. the shape) used by the hand in the production of the sign, the movement carried out by the hand, the place of production and articulation of the sign and finally the orientation of the palm of the but no. The attempt to trace the structures of vocal languages in

sign languages, as well as the presumed equivalence between phonemes and cheremic, has been questioned by various linguists. Various studies have confirmed that sign language, like vocal language, differs from other non-linguistic semiotic systems and all the typical properties of linguistic codes can be found in it, namely:

- systematicity
- articulation
- variability
- arbitrariness
- iconicity
- combinatorics
- semantic indeterminacy
- reflexivity
- metalinguisticity

## **2. Italian Sign Language (LIS)**

Let's analyze some of the properties indicated above in the LIS (Italian Sign Language). Starting from systematicity, by it we mean the property according to which the signs of a code maintain regular relations with all the other signs of the same code, both on a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic level. An example of systematicity is the principle of composition to which the signs of a language can be traced. In LIS, signs such as eating, eating ice cream, eating apple have in common the movement of bringing something to the mouth, but they differ according to the shape of the food that is eaten. Signs such as name, subtitle, list have in common the configuration of the hands and are distinguished by their movement (Russo Cardona-Volterra: 2007, 50). Paradigmatic relationships are those that are realized in the signs of a language by selection or association of signs in presentia with other signs in absentia. Systematicity is also achieved on a syntagmatic level, in presentia, that is, linguistic signs can be combined in the sentence in certain ways. In Italian the negation precedes the verb and follows the pronoun: I don't eat pizza. In LIS this expression is transformed into: I pizza eat no, because as a rule the negation must be placed at the end (Russo Cardona-Volterra: 2007, 53). By articulation we mean the property according to which the signifier of a sign results from the combination of smaller segments, the position of each has a distinctive character, that is, it modifies the value of the sign. In LIS, as in any other sign language, each sign is composed of the combination of the cheremi of place, configuration, movement and orientation whose value is distinctive, so that when one of the cheremi changes, the meaning of the sign will also change. For example, in the couple-minimum child-beggar there is only one cheremi that distinguishes the two signs: that of the orientation of the hand. For the child sign, the palm of the hand faces the ground; for the beggar sign, the palm of the hand is facing upwards. By arbitrariness we mean the principle enunciated by Saussure, according to which the relationships between the signifier and the signified are not naturally motivated but depend on a convention between the speakers of a language. The same meaning can be represented in various languages by different signifiers. In LIS the principle of arbitrariness is also a diatopic characteristic and responds to the need to represent the same meaning with a different signifier. For example, comparing the realization of the iconic tree sign in the varieties of the Italian sign language, we see that a different choice

has been made of the characteristic that represents that object: some varieties highlight the trunk of the tree, while others prefer to highlight the whole structure (figure1)

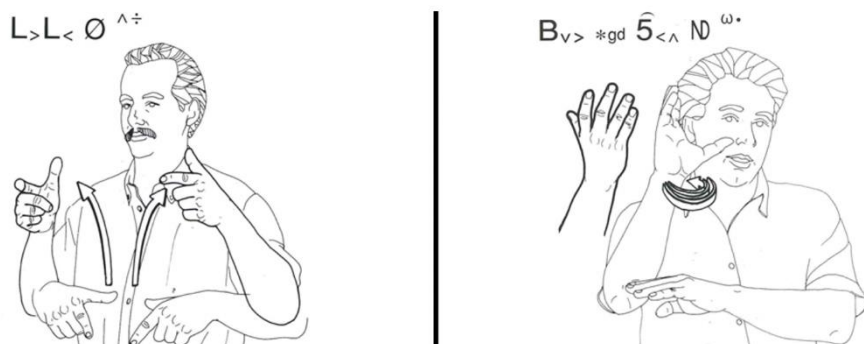


Figure 1 - TREE sign in two variables of the Italian Sign Language (LIS) (Elena Radutzky, Elementary Bilingual Dictionary of the Italian Sign Language, Ed. Kappa, 2001).

Finally, let us analyze the last two properties: semantic indeterminacy and reflexive meta - linguistics. Semantic inordinateness according to De Mauro's definition is: "[...] property of natural languages for which there is no absolute predetermination of the semantic extension of a linguistic sign. The meaning associated with a signifier can be seen as an area with a well-defined and shared semantic center and indefinite, blurred, vague outlines that can be reshaped, extended or narrowed ". (De Mauro: 1982, 102). The phenomenon of metaphor is part of the semantic indeterminacy, through which "a word extends its scope of use to others in which it is usually not used or which usually require the use of different terms" (Russo Cardona and Volterra, 2007: 89). An example from Italian is the use of the now widely used expression 'table leg'. The term 'leg' refers to a part of the human body, not to a component of the table. However, the meaning of "leg" as something that holds a body is extended to the sphere of furniture: for example, table leg but also chair leg. For the LIS, Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto (2001) present the example of the 'word' sign (figure 2), which instead of being articulated starting from the mouth, is created on the forehead (figure 3) with the meaning of 'printed word in the mind'.

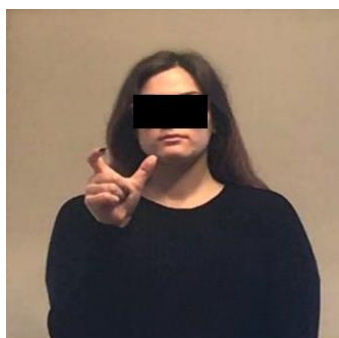


Figure 2 - WORD sign (Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto, 2001)



Figure 3 - WORD sign on the forehead (Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto, 2001)

Finally, the term reflexive meta-linguisticity refers to one of the main properties of a linguistic code for which the code itself can use its own signs to talk about itself. Meta-linguisticity is therefore the property of a code to operate on itself and to modify the semantic sphere of its linguistic signs. The LIS code uses itself to explain the formation and articulation of LIS signs. The deaf community continually needs to adapt signs, innovate, implement and then use a LIS code base transforming it according to needs or new communicative situations. This happened, for example, during the SARS cov2 pandemic when the need arose to create a sign for Coronavirus and to adapt the 'positive' / 'negative' signs that have also taken on a different meaning for the deaf community (Figure 4)



Figure 4 - Information Campaign of the Ministry of Health "Coronavirus health emergency"

The most recent studies on sign languages have shown that to analyze and describe them in the best possible way, it is necessary to start from gestural and corporeal matter, from how it is organized to signify, without trying to assimilate them to vocal languages. The articulators that convey meaning in sign language are of two types, manual and non-manual. On the basis of the former, each sign can be composed of minimal components that cannot be further broken down: the hands, in fact, take on different configurations, in certain places in the space and with certain movements and orientations; these components, which Stokoe called cheremi, are found in all sign languages and contribute to the formation of the sign, which can be performed with one hand or with two hands and in this case they can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. In sign languages, the cheremi are co-articulated in the constitution of the single sign, thus determining phenomena of simultaneity and multiplanarity. These phenomena arise from the simultaneous use of manual and non-manual components, which participate in the process of signification by conveying information of various kinds and exploiting the three dimensions of sign space, plus that of time. The ability to use hands simultaneously and non-manual components (CNM), such as facial expression, posture, gaze, labializations and oral components, is a feature of sign

languages and also of LIS. To conclude this brief examination of the salient features of LIS, let us now examine the syntactic structure, that is, the way in which significant units are combined in sentences and periods. The syntax in sign languages is strongly linked to space, non-randomly linked to space, and influenced by the visual perception of the world that deaf people have; in fact, the most common syntactic constructions are: Subject-Object-Verb (O.S.V.) and Object-Subject-Verb (O.S.V.). Since LIS is a simultaneous, multilinear and kinematic language, the non-manual components also contribute to realizing the syntactic functions which, accompanying the sign, are able to realize the concordances or to indicate the communicative intentions of an entire sentence. An affirmative sentence has a neutral facial expression, a negative is indicated by the simultaneous movement of the head and hands in the moment of negation, a hypothetical sentence is indicated by the arched eyebrows and the forward movement of the shoulders and face. The syntax of sign languages therefore exploits all the possibilities of the visual-gestural modality and uses space and the simultaneous dimension to establish relationships between the elements of the language and the parts of speech.

### **3. Learn Sign Language**

There is the hypothesis of an evolutionary origin of human gestures that is common to the deaf as much as to the hearing, which would thus lay the prerequisites for the learning of a sign language by the hearing. Starting from the Chomskyan assumption of the existence of a "deep structure" that allows each language to fulfill the task of communicating by translating into a socially relevant action, it can be assumed that the main objective of a language education is non-development only of a linguistic competence but also of a communicative competence, that is the production of linguistic acts adequate to the context of enunciation. The learning process involves steps that enable the speaker of a vocal language to acquire both sign language skills. One cannot ignore the cultural implications of the two languages that come into contact: fully possessing a sign language, like any other vocal language, means first of all internalizing the cultural micro-system of the reference community and specifically, that of the deaf. An Italian hearing person, while sharing nationality with a deaf Italian, does not fully share the same system of values with the latter. Sign language does not provide for a writing system and this determines a further separation of the deaf culture from the hearing one; in fact, sign language tends to be structured in such a way as to facilitate the memorization of knowledge and information that comes from the outside, sometimes even being redundant and repetitive. Usually those who decide to learn sign language are motivated by multiple reasons and this constitutes a further difficulty in the learning path and even more so in that of teaching. The people who undertake the study of sign language constitute a very heterogeneous and variegated whole; in fact, there is no single student profile. Often those who decide to learn sign language do so in adulthood, after passing the so-called "sensitive period" and can also reach high levels of competence. A hearing student who approaches sign language must be seriously motivated if he is to also achieve educational success. Today we approach sign language driven by curiosity for the peculiarities of this language and the culture connected to it, but also and above all for professional reasons. In fact, many people see the possibility of new job opportunities in sign language and, for this reason, deepen their training as interpreters or assistants in autonomy and communication. Others, however, consider it a specialized skill that can improve their professionalism to establish more effective communication with the deaf user. The true professional sign language teacher knows well that signed languages are culturally and



semiotically multidimensional; he knows well that they use space and the simultaneous dimension to establish relationships between parts of discourse and to build units that are never purely sequential but multi-articulated and simultaneous with each other. . He knows well that sign language uses multimodality through the recurrent use of manual and non-manual articulators, therefore through the position of the torso and shoulders, facial expressions, non-manual components, the signer's gaze and the head. In addition, the sign language teacher is also required to manage the emotional difficulties that may arise in the relationship between hearing and deaf.

#### **4. Experiences of teaching methods**

The treacherous recognition of Italian sign language and the slow, if not lacking legislation on the person, have resulted in a lack of training offer in the teaching of LIS. In Italy, the first LIS courses were born in the early 1980s at the main provincial sections of the ENS (national deaf organization); these are absolutely pioneering courses held by deaf people with a level of awareness of their own language just starting, courses whose wording refers not to LIS but to gestural mimic language (LMG). At the beginning of the nineties these courses began to be more fully structured thanks to a progressive awareness on the part of a small group of deaf Italians. The current situation is completely different, as the training offer of LIS courses is greatly increased on the national territory and very articulated in programming. Today not only ENS but associations, cooperatives and universities are involved in LIS training, often with different approaches and methodologies. The training process can be considered complete which, starting from theoretical learning, evolves into a real active competence of LIS. From the constructivist approach derive several educational models that have developed since the early nineties: community of learners, cognitive apprenticeship, environments for generative learning and intentional learning environments.

##### **4.1. The CounseLis method**

Inspired by constructivism is the CounseLis method. CounseLis is a training and refresher institution on sign language and interpreting. Born in the autumn of 2013, it offers courses and services aimed at cultural, personal and professional growth for both deaf and hearing impaired people. CounseLis in its training courses takes into account the emotional dimension which is very important in the learning path of LIS, and which is often neglected. The CounseLis method puts the student at the center of teaching, trying to stimulate co-constructed, active, autonomous, cooperative learning processes, in which the teacher is called upon from time to time to renegotiate his role and to question his work. The primary objective is the development of linguistic and communicative skills, through a critical and dynamic path made up of exercises that allow the student to experience their own personal constructs. In theory, at the base of every individual system of knowledge there is the ability to build predictions about what will happen, in order to properly plan one's actions. Within the class group, the comparison between students is essential to improve personal skills; the interpersonal relationships that each student shares with his peers respond to the double need to feel confirmed and, therefore, part of a community in which he finds forms of scaffolding necessary to realize his potential. With the CounseLis method, the student is co-responsible for learning and, therefore, is stimulated to self-assessment, to reflect on their own behaviors and skills. CounseLis staff is largely made up of hearing-impaired signing professionals, flanked by deaf native speakers. Lessons are held in LIS so that students from the first to the last day of the course have an active practice of the language. Teachers, hearing and deaf, in no case may use vocal and written Italian or

labializations; only in cases of difficulty are gestures, body expressions, the use of concrete references or at most images allowed. In the learning path of LIS, the comparison with the Italian language and with one's own wealth of knowledge is inevitable, therefore, a progressive adaptation of the student to the communication situations in LIS is required. Since the early stages of learning are difficult for the student, it is the primary task of the teacher to stimulate him to constant attention and encourage him in the most difficult situations. The training course is organized in modules with objectives, contents and exercise activities. The protagonist of every didactic activity is always the student who must learn to identify his own weaknesses and strengths, while recognizing progress and difficulties for himself, so as to gradually reach a real and aware perception of the skills actually acquired. The tasks that are required to the student, especially in the first phase of learning, are not accompanied by any kind of theoretical explanation, it is up to the teacher to directly and practically produce the input on which the required activity is built. Throughout the educational path, the student will have to develop a strong sense of responsibility, but also of leadership, without feeling towards the teacher either a sense of inferiority or fear of making a mistake. In a more mature phase of language acquisition, the student will also have to learn to develop their own autonomy of thought and judgment on what is the subject of study. On the basis of these assumptions, the CounseLis method provides that the student is the protagonist of the learning process and that he is part of a group of apprentices within which, under the guidance of a teacher, he develops language and communication skills and competences that must be able to be used in the plurality of real contexts; moreover, starting from the assumption that reality presents itself in an extremely complex way, teaching must also be structured in a complex way. If on the one hand the student is the protagonist of this path, on the other the teacher has the task of creating the best conditions to facilitate the language acquisition process, as he remains the main owner of the linguistic model to which students refer during their path, more than perhaps occurs in vocal languages, also because, given the lack of adequate teaching materials available, the teacher remains the primary source of linguistic stimulation and information. This state of affairs amplifies the teacher's responsibility during the teaching process because he is aware that the student builds his knowledge and competence of the language starting from his inputs. However, before the student internalizes and processes these inputs, there are several stages: that of perception, understanding, acceptance and integration. It is clear that the teacher is also subjected to continuous training and self-training, therefore the teachers of the school themselves can attend and participate in the lessons, elaborating reflections on the educational activity carried out and on their own professional competencies.

## **5. Sars cov2 and LIS pandemic: a CounseLis teaching experience**

The spread of Sars cov2 has forced the CounseLis school to significantly reshape its teaching approach, adapting it to online and distance learning. The first step to take, for CounseLis, consisted in choosing an online platform such as Google Classroom. The revision of the LIS teaching method was complex, especially as regards the initial A1 level. It was necessary to transform the constructivist-contextual teaching-learning dynamic into an autonomous-constructivist teaching-learning, that is, having to discretize all the learning steps that usually, in the classroom and face-to-face, take place in the dynamic relationship between student and teacher. and in the phenomenological body co-presence. Starting from the idea that LIS can be learned, or rather internalized, by leveraging on the visual 'profound grammar' which is based on the practical-perceptive experience of our common way of being in the world - therefore moving from a phenomenologically oriented approach - CounseLis has reconstructed an online



A1 level that privileged an individual study component based on asynchronous lessons and moments of assessment and one-to-one synchronous communication with the mother tongue teacher. Therefore, in accordance with communicative and constructivist approaches, even in the online course the learning of the language did not take place through grammatical and / or functional explanations; the video material presented was not marked with slowness and emphasis or avoiding complex vocabulary, the average use of LIS was privileged; only the corrections, made in video by the teachers, have a slow and simplified mark, while the didactic executions of a sequential visual image (vignette) enriched with vocabulary and idiomatic signs have favored a natural marked. Also in this distance teaching experience CourseLis has privileged the centrality of the student, trying to stimulate his co-constructed, active, autonomous and cooperative learning processes. In the work of reorganizing the teaching method for each LIS online level from A1 to C2, a syllabus was organized that integrated with the structure of the course and of course with the CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference). The syllabus was organized to develop the ability to mark a basic lexicon in a linear way, to be able to attribute an experiential value to space, to one's body, to facial expressions, to movement and to configurations (figure 5 and figure 6). With this online teaching methodology started in April 2020 and still in progress, 30 students were trained at level A1 until August 2022; of these, currently 4 are completing level A1; 5 are enrolled in level A2, 1 are enrolled in level B1, 2 are enrolled in level B2.

<b>Organization of the course</b>	
<b>20 didactic sections:</b> I sec. (9 unit) II sec. (9 unit) III sec. (9 unit) IV sec. (9 unit) V sec. (9 unit) VI sec. (9 unit) VII sec. (9 unit) VIII sec. (9 unit) IX sec. (9 unit) X sec. (9 unit)	
<b>Sillabo</b>	
grammar and morphosyntax; classes of	LIS manual alphabet, classes of verbs and classes of signs with construction of the plural. personal pronouns and adjectives. family, numbers, colors. descriptive

commonly used lexical forms and fields	classifiers, stands, grasping, movement. time and phases of the day. days of the week. months of the year. interrogative sentences. Auxiliary verbs. Simple negative phrases. Morphological numbers over time. Means of transport. Food. Animals. Degrees of education. Common trades, basic emotions
Cultural notions	signs and not gestures; minimum units to create a sign; identification of the linguistic space; fine motor skills; visual memory
communication functions; speech acts and discursive genres; politeness	greetings and pleasantries; greet, respond to greetings; introduce yourself and present; farewell. Ask / provide basic information. Talk about daily actions. List the seasons, the days of the week, the months of the year. Use numbers; order at the bar and restaurant; describe rooms and objects in the house.
basic and high-frequency vocabulary in its specific context of use	commonly used qualifying adjectives (beautiful, ugly, near, far, difficult, easy, knowing and not knowing, nothing, nothing, strange, angry, etc.). Lexicon inherent to personal data: name, surname, names of professions, marital status, age. Lexicon of public places and services: airport, bank, hotel, restaurant, market. Meals, foods, drinks. Circumstantial place names (above, below, beside, in front, behind). seasons, days of the week, months of the year, numbers from 1 to 100. Parts and objects of the house.
reference textual genres	elementary stories: listening / understanding and production

Figure 5 - Syllabus LIS A1online CourseLis.

<b>TARGETS/COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS</b>
<p>He's able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to understand short texts marked slowly and clearly.</li> <li>• to position yourself so that the signs are easily visible to the recipients.</li> <li>• to express emotional states only with the iconic representation (without the use of manual signs).</li> <li>• to distinguish between positive and negative attitudes on the basis of non-manual components (eg frowned eyebrows, raised eyebrows).</li> <li>• to understand the direct acceptance or rejection of requests or questions.</li> <li>• to use typing when there are communication problems.</li> <li>• to give the interlocutor a visual feedback through conventionalized phrases and labialisations.</li> </ul>

- to give the interlocutor visual feedback (positive and negative) using facial expressions and other non-manual elements (e.g. a nod of the head, shaking of the head).
- to respond adequately in conventional interactions, eg. responding with phrases like welcome / don't care / all right / thank you.
- to greet a deaf person in an appropriate way.
- to use different strategies to establish the eye contact necessary for communication (e.g. by nodding, touching the other party on the shoulder, on the arm, on the hand, tapping on the table, turning the light on and off).
- to attract attention to take the turn in conversation (e.g. raising the hand or gesturing to obtain eye contact, touching the other party on the shoulder).
- to maintain eye contact with the interlocutor.
- to understand a statement as a direct request, a question or an order and to react accordingly.
- to understand the shape and size of an object on the basis of the following speech (e.g. the shape of a pyramid) and to identify the object denoted.

He's able to:

- to use personal pronouns correctly.
- to form simple sentences according to the basic order schemes of the SOV / SVO constituents.
- to represent the thickness of a denoted object using productive signs.
- to construct a simple sentence with the use of lexical signs.
- to correctly produce labializations and to use them to differentiate otherwise identical signs.
- to spell, through typing, proper names and technical expressions.
- to describe the physical form of a denoted entity (height, width, length).
- to score direct requests.
- to mark conventional greetings and farewell expressions.
- to describe a person in speech through a saw denoting facial expressions, hairstyle and physical characteristics or through the clothes he often wears.
- to produce clear and unambiguous hand configurations.
- to produce the lexical signs for the months, days of the week and times of the day.
- to declare their opinion (agree, disagree).

Figure 6 - Goals of the A1online CouseLis level.

## Conclusions

The Italian Sign Language (LIS) is one of the many languages in the world that exploit a mode of visual-gestural communication. It is one of the possible declinations of the faculty of language, or rather the inherent ability of human to generate and develop a complex system of

signs through which events, states of affairs, actions of the world outside and inside the speaker are signified. It has become over time, also thanks to the numerous legislative proposals containing provisions for the promotion of the full participation of deaf people in collective life, minority language and therefore symbol of identity and self-determination. The numerous researches and reflections about the development of teaching methods that exploit the visual-gestural channel as a communicative system, represent the expression of an increasingly strong and widespread linguistic awareness in the scientific community.

Research on sign language is structured in a linguistic, methodical and systematic comparison between vocal languages and sign language. These studies have long shown that sign language is a verbal communication system in all respects, signs are included in a system of precise rules shared by an entire community, the signing one, as it produces and conveys content.

The theoretical approach that best seems to realize these conditions is the constructivist one which considers learning as a collective process of construction of meanings, of new experiences, of new structures in which the student actively participates, becoming the protagonist of the process, always starting from what are his foreknowledge as well as the knowledge acquired step by step. In this interpretive framework, the CounseLis method represents a valid approach for the development of the language skills of deaf people, as it allows to make the student co-responsible for its learning process by stimulating it to self-assessment and reflection on its own behaviors and skills. In this sense, the spread of the pandemic emergency from Sars-Cov2, forcing a reshaping of the educational approach to adapt it to online and distance learning, made it possible to carry out a teaching/learning experience that favored the individual study component through a phenomenologically oriented approach. In the light of this discussion, it is therefore possible to conclude that the preliminary results of this work reinforce the idea that the use of the CounseLis method adapted to distance learning, enables efficient and concrete responses to the educational needs of deaf people. In the future, therefore, it would be desirable for such approaches to become daily practice of Educational and Educational Institutions even in non-emergency periods, so that accessibility and inclusion do not remain mere statements of theoretical principles.

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