
ADVICE ON EUROPEAN RESEARCH PROJECT CONTENT4ALL

Advisory committee on Flemish Sign Language



On November 29th 2017, during an information session organised by the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, the Advisory Committee on Flemish Sign Language (VGT) was introduced to the project [CONTENT4ALL](#). This is a three-year research project under the Horizon 2020 [‘Innovative action’](#) programme. It is carried out by a consortium of several European partners from Switzerland, the UK, Germany and Belgium (VRT), and receives a European grant of 3.5 million euros.

In the course of the research project an aim is to build a 3D representation of a human sign language interpreter (an ‘avatar’) partially based on VGT data collected and analysed through machine learning. The final goal is to achieve automated sign language translation for TV broadcasting through a virtual interpreter-avatar.

The VRT got involved as a partner targeting to make more content accessible to Flemish deaf VGT signers by providing automated sign language translation. Ideally, the 3D-model that will be built resembles a human sign language interpreter, and will be used for TV broadcasts such as news, weather forecast or emergency situation reporting.

The Advisory Committee wants to emphasize that avatars do have practical applicability, and that more research in this area is certainly welcome. Avatars could be used for providing automated announcements in sign language in public spaces such as airports and railway stations, in situations in which now already “speech to text” technology is used for spoken languages. It is important to understand that these situations do not concern translations (neither in Dutch or in VGT).

However, we do not (yet) see applications of avatars for automated translations to Flemish Sign Language for public broadcasting, especially not for critical broadcasting like news and emergency reporting. Doof Vlaanderen, the representative organization of Flemish deaf

signers, and the Flemish Sign Language Centre, the expertise center on VGT, do not support these applications. Current interpretation of the news by (human) VGT interpreters is already particularly complex. It is unrealistic to surpass these complex translation processes by providing avatars, and demonstrates lack of critical understanding of translation processes (especially concerning but not limited to sign languages). Correct translation of and broadcasting in VGT is crucial in every situation, and especially in emergency situations, when an incorrect translation can cost human lives. It is equally inconceivable and undesirable to replace human presenters of a public broadcaster by 3D-models who read out previously introduced Dutch words in the right order. It is equally absurd that TV broadcasting would be partially based on live “Google Translate” translations of e.g. a BBC programme, which would then be produced automatically via “text to speech”.

The CONTENT4ALL project partners would perfectly have been able to assess these complexities and impossibilities, if they had consulted and surveyed, in the designer phase, interested deaf organizations with expertise concerning sign languages. However, this has not been the case. Not one deaf organization is involved as a project partner. Not one of the members of the project’s advisory board knows a sign language. The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) has not been consulted. Flemish deaf organizations were only informed after the project had already begun, and were told that the project would be carried out no matter what.

The Advisory Committee has already repeatedly advised VRT to actually attend to the demands and needs of deaf VGT signers [concerning broadcasts in VGT](#). For example the translation by interpreters of the 7pm news VRT is currently offering, is not meeting these demands. Many deaf VGT signers cannot fully understand or follow the interpreted news. Flemish signers are demanding their own media productions directly in VGT (not mainstream media made ‘accessible’ through interpreters).

This project illustrates that the VRT does not have or does not wish to have insight into the actual demands of deaf VGT signers concerning broadcasting. Flemish deaf VGT signers and their representative organisations are not asking for and do not validate a project like CONTENT4ALL as it is run today. Flemish signers do not need an artificial “Google Translate”-VGT, but TV programmes in VGT that do effectively promote and advance the use of VGT, are being produced by deaf people and make content truly available to them.

The Advisory Committee on VGT acknowledges:

1. That the project CONTENT4ALL has already started, although with a flawed focus;
2. That, with some goodwill of the project partners, the project can be adjusted.

In case the project is being carried out, the Committee advises:

1. That from now on, in every project phase, interested organisations will be consulted, as well as deaf academics with language expertise, and that the project grant is being adjusted accordingly;

2. That the project will focus on situations in which sign language-avatars can effectively be of use (like automated announcements), after advice by interested organisations;
3. That in no case, the VRT will use interpreter-avatars for its own broadcasting, especially, but not limited to, news broadcasting, children programmes or broadcasting in emergency situations.

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In behalf of the advisory committee on Flemish Sign Language
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