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THE SILENT DIALOGUE: EXPLORING LANGUAGE IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING IN THE SERBIAN SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

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Ана Д. Јовановић

НЕЧУЈНИ ДИЈАЛОГ: ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ ЈЕЗИЧКОГ ИДЕНТИТЕТА И ЈЕЗИЧКЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ И ПЛАНИРАЊА У ЗАЈЕДНИЦИ КОЈА СЕ СЛУЖИ ЗНАКОВНИМ ЈЕЗИКОМ У СРБИЈИ

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The Silent Dialogue: Exploring Language Identity and Language Policy and Planning in the Serbian Sign Language Community

Abstract

This dissertation examines the divide between *de jure* language policy and *de facto* accessibility for the Serbian Deaf community under the Law on the Use of Sign Language. Utilizing a concurrent mixed-methods triangulation design, the study bridges qualitative lifeworld accounts (N = 24) analyzed via reflexive thematic analysis with quantitative survey metrics mapping the dominant hearing majority (N = 100). Qualitative findings reveal the Law functions as a statutory mirage. Public spaces remain highly inaccessible, generating institutional trauma like *the clinical typist turn* in healthcare and forcing a structural dependency that externalizes communicative burdens onto family networks. In education, a poorly managed national inclusion strategy has re-engineered specialized schools into catch-all facilities for diverse neurodivergent profiles, diluting their linguistic capital and forcing students to maintain academic survival through uncompensated *compensatory peer labor*. This external clinical tracking and internal institutional dilution drive an *existential demographic attrition panic* regarding the survival of Deaf culture. Quantitative data validates these exclusions, exposing a widespread public literacy vacuum: 63% of the hearing public is unaware of the language's legal status, and 82% possesses zero to minimal sign literacy. Crucially, 88% support increased state funding for interpreters, proving execution failures stem from a lack of state enforcement rather than public resistance.

Keywords: Serbian Sign Language (SSL), Language Policy and Planning, Critical Sociolinguistics, Institutional Trauma, Educational Inclusion, Existential Attrition

Scientific Field: Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics

Scientific Subfield: Language Policy and Planning, Language Identity, Serbian Sign Language (SSL)

Нечујни дијалог: Истраживање језичког идентитета и језичке политике и планирања у заједници која се служи знаковним језиком у Србији

Сажетак

Ова дисертација истражује јаз између *de jure* језичке политике и *de facto* приступачности за заједницу Глувих у Србији према Закону о употреби знаковног језика. Користећи конкурентну тријангулацију мешовитих метода, студија повезује квалитативне приказе живота (N = 24), анализиране рефлексивном тематском анализом са квантитативном анкетом која мапира чујућу већину (N = 100). Квалитативни налази откривају да Закон делује као статуторна илузија. Јавни простори су неприступачни, узрокујући институционалну трауму попут *клиничког дактилографског окрета* и намећући структурну зависност која терет пребацује на породицу. У образовању, лоше вођена стратегија инклузије претворила је специјалне школе у установе општег типа за неуродивергентне профиле, чиме је разводњен лингвистички капитал, а ученици приморани на неплаћени *компензаторни вршњачки рад*. Ово клиничко праћење и институционално разводњавање покрећу *егзистенцијалну панику од демографског осипања* културе Глувих. Квантитативни подаци потврђују ову искљученост, разоткривајући вакуум јавне писмености: 63% чујућих не зна за законски статус језика, а 82% има нулту до минималну знаковну писменост. Кључно је што 88% подржава веће државно финансирање тумача, што доказује да неуспеси спровођења проистичу из недостатка државног извршења, а не отпора јавности.

Кључне речи: српски знаковни језик (СЗЈ), језичка политика и планирање, критичка социолингвистика, институционална траума, образовна инклузија, егзистенцијално осипање

Научна област: социолингвистика и примењена лингвистика

Ужа научна област: језичка политика и планирање, језички идентитет, српски знаковни језик (СЗЈ)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

1.1. Background of the Study 1

1.2. Statement of the Problem 1

1.3. Research Hypotheses 3

1.4. Methodology and Significance of the Study 3

1.5. Structural Roadmap of the Inquiry 4

2. LITERATURE REVIEW 5

2.1. Sociolinguistics and Sign Languages 5

2.1.1. Language in Multicultural and Multilingual Contexts 6

2.1.2. Language and Identity Construction 8

2.2. Language Policy and Planning Frameworks 10

2.2.1. Language Policy and Planning for Deaf Communities 12

2.2.2 European Legislative and Policy Frameworks 14

2.2.3 Language Education Policy and Planning in Serbia 17

2.2.3.1 Legislative Milestones and Implementation Challenges 18

2.2.3.2 Sociopolitical and Ideological Considerations 20

2.2.3.3 Recent Developments and Future Directions 21

2.3. History of Deaf Education 22

2.3.1. Deaf Education in Serbia 23

2.3.1.1. The Foundational Period (Late 19th Century to 1945) 24

2.3.1.2. The Yugoslav Era (1945 - 1991) 24

2.3.1.3. The Period of Transition (1991 - 2015) 24

2.3.1.4. Recent Developments and the Action Plan (Post-2015) 26

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 28

3.1. Research Design and Pragmatic Grounding 28

3.1.1. Qualitative Intrinsic Case Study Research Approach 28

3.1.2. Exploratory Grounded Design and Justification 30

3.1.3. Quantitative Triangulation Phase 31

3.1.4. Methodological Validity and Operationalization of Identity Measures 32

3.2. Data Collection Methods and Sampling 33
3.2.1. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews – Deaf Cohort 33
3.2.1.1. Sampling Strategy and Participant Demographics 35
3.2.1.2. Data Collection Procedure 36
3.2.2. Quantitative Pilot Survey – Hearing Cohort 36
3.3. Data Analysis 37
3.3.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Coding Process 37
3.3.2. Triangulation and Interpretation of Findings 39
3.4. Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity 39
3.5. Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness 42
3.6. Chapter Summary 44
4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS 45
4.1. Theme 1: The Spectrum of Deafhood—Cultural Pride vs. Instrumental Language Orientation 45
4.1.1. Ontological Anchors of Deafhood: Generational Language Transmission and Identity Ownership 46
4.1.2. Repertoires of Plurilingualism: Regional Dialects and International Sign Fluidity 47
4.1.3. Instrumental Tool Pragmatism and the Pressure of Bimodal Detachment 49
4.1.4. Internal Community Friction: Identity Contestation and Technological Divides 50
4.1.5. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis 51
4.2. Theme 2: Systemic Policy Inertia—The Chasm Between *De Jure* Legislation and *De Facto* Public Space Accessibility 53
4.2.1. The Statutory Mirage: *De Jure* Rights and the Reality of Bureaucratic Exclusion 53
4.2.2. Institutional Trauma in Medical and Public Welfare Spaces 55
4.2.3. The Digital Relay Illusion: Power Dynamics and Protocol Fractures in the SOS Center 57
4.2.4. Media Erasure, Symbolic Inclusion, and the Critique of Authentic Representation 58
4.2.5. Structural Unemployment and the Limitations of Short-Term Accommodation 60
4.2.6. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis 61

4.3. Theme 3: Institutional Linguistic Deprivation and the Compensatory Agency of Horizontal Peer Networks 62
4.3.1. Instructional Deprivation and Teacher Fluency Deficits 62
4.3.2. Active Suppression and the Silencing of Student Advocacy 63
4.3.3. The Emergence of Compensatory Peer Translation Networks 65
4.3.4. Survey Data Triangulation and Institutional Density 67
4.3.5. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis 68
4.4. Theme 4: Existential Biopolitical Attrition—Technologies of Fixation and the Fragile Future of SSL 69
4.4.1. The Threat of Demographic Attrition: Youth Perspectives on Clinical Intervention 69
4.4.2. Spatial Isolation and the Defensive Preservation of Cultural Safe Havens 71
4.4.3. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis 72
4.5. The Synthetic Conceptual Model 73
4.5.1. Theoretical Foundations: Merging Existing and Newly Developed Concepts 73
4.5.2. Analytical and Conceptual Implications of the Model 75
4.6. Chapter Summary 76
5. CONCLUSION 77
5.1. Evaluation of Hypothesis 1: Educational Integration vs. Instructional Deprivation 77
5.2. Evaluation of Hypothesis 2: Legal Recognition vs. Street-Level Empowerment 80
5.3. Evaluation of Hypothesis 3: The Intertwined Dynamics of Community Identity 83
6. OPERATIONAL POLICY AND MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS 87
6.1. Educational Administration and Specialized School Reform 87
6.2. Public Sector Infrastructure and Healthcare Reform 89
6.3. Digital Relay Frameworks and Professional Standardization 91
6.4. Labor Market Interventions and Structural Employment Reform 93
6.5. Theoretical Contributions to Critical Sociolinguistics 95
6.5.1. Deconstructing Monolithic Identity: Instrumental Tool Pragmatism 95
6.5.2. Redefining Policy Execution: Compensatory Peer Labor 96

6.5.3. Redefining Language Shift: Existential Demographic Attrition Panic 96
6.6. Institutional Limitations 97
6.6.1. Methodological Boundaries and Institutional Scope 97
6.6.2. Empirical Insights from the Quantitative Triangulation Phase 97
6.6.3. Epistemological Positionality and Concluding Synthesis 98
7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 100
8. REFERENCES 102
9. APPENDIX 113
10. AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY 122

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

The intersection of language policy, minority rights, and cultural identity within signing communities represents one of the most complex areas of contemporary sociolinguistic inquiry (Blommaert, 2010; Tollefson, 2013). Historically, sign languages have been marginalized by dominant hearing societies, framed through a medical-pathological lens that views *Deafness* as an individual sensory deficit to be cured rather than as a marker of linguistic minority status (Lane, 1992; Padden & Humphries, 2005). Over the past several decades, the global shift toward a sociocultural model of *Deafhood* has sought to reclaim manual communication as an ontological asset and a constitutional right by birth (Ladd, 2003). In the Republic of Serbia, this struggle for linguistic self-determination achieved a major historical milestone with the passage of the Law on the Use of Sign Language (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 38/2015). This top-down legal framework was designed to grant official legal status to Serbian Sign Language (SSL), guarantee the provision of professional interpretation services across public sectors, and foster an accessible civic space for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing population (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 38/2015).

However, the formal text of a legislative act does not automatically guarantee real-world execution. In critical sociolinguistics, a sharp distinction is made between *de jure* statutory status planning and *de facto* street-level language acquisition and access (Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). In the decade following the passage of the Law on the Use of Sign Language in 2015, the Serbian signing community has occupied a contradictory sociolinguistic space. While the state presents an image of progressive human rights compliance on paper, the everyday reality for SSL users remains defined by systemic communication barriers, institutional gatekeeping, and frontline exclusion (Gordić, 2025; Šarić, 2016). This dissertation is positioned within this policy-practice gap, exploring how signing individuals navigate, resist, and adapt to a public infrastructure that frequently treats their primary language as an administrative afterthought (cf. McCarty, 2011; Tollefson, 2013).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The core problem animating this research is two-fold, encompassing a visible crisis of public sector accessibility and a more subtle, systemic hollowing out of traditional language preservation environments. On the first front, the street-level execution of the Law on the Use of Sign Language has largely collapsed due to a lack of localized implementation mechanisms, dedicated state budgets, and mandatory public sector staff training (Gordić, 2025; Šarić, 2016). When entering critical civic spaces, such as municipal registries, post offices, police departments, and judicial courts, Deaf

citizens routinely encounter frontline personnel who exhibit intense communicative anxiety or resistance. This total lack of preparation reduces public services to "blind counters," where minoritized individuals are forced to abandon their natural language and rely on primitive fallback strategies like basic pantomime or writing notes on scraps of paper (Gordić, 2025; Šarić, 2016).

This administrative failure becomes highly dangerous within public healthcare spaces (Harmer, 1999; Pollard, 1998). The complete absence of permanent, on-site professional interpreter networks transforms standard clinical checkups into sites of profound institutional trauma and biological risk (Harmer, 1999). This vulnerability is vividly physicalized by a widespread routine habit conceptualized in this study as *the clinical typist turn*, the physical movement of a medical practitioner who turns away from a Deaf patient to log data into a computer terminal while continuing to speak, instantly cutting off all visual communication tracks and lip-reading frames (Pollard, 1998). This structural disregard, which forces individuals to guess their own prescription guidelines, often results in severe medication errors and physical harm (Harmer, 1999; Pollard, 1998). This lack of infrastructure forces an unfair externalization of operational costs onto the Deaf individual's family unit, compelling adults to rely on their hearing children or aging relatives for routine transactions, transforming basic human needs into sources of deep personal guilt and structural dependency (Radoman, 2012; Šarić, 2016).

On the second front, the community faces an internal crisis of purpose within its traditional language hubs. Under the current execution of the Serbian national inclusion strategy, specialized schools for the Deaf, such as the historic Stefan Dečanski institution in Belgrade, have been structurally re-engineered into catch-all facilities for highly diverse developmental and neurodivergent profiles following the Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia by 2030. This macro-policy shift severely dilutes the linguistic capital of the classroom environment. Instructors who already lack baseline conversational and academic SSL proficiency are left entirely unequipped to balance profound deafness with complex neurodivergent needs (Savić, 2015). Falling back on rigid, speech-centric compliance tracks, these specialized environments frequently become sites of instructional deprivation rather than linguistic sanctuaries (Radoman, 2012; Savić, 2015). This institutional dilution fractures the spatial density required for natural sign language transmission among youth, leaving the student body to cover up these structural cracks through uncompensated, horizontal *compensatory peer labor* just to survive academically (Savić, 2015).

This dual pressure, aggressive oralist mainstreaming from the outside and systemic institutional dilution from the inside, produces what this study introduces as the concept of *existential demographic attrition panic* among users, who view the rapid decline of their visual-manual spaces as an immediate threat to the future survival of Deaf culture in Serbia.

1.3. Research Hypotheses

To address this problem systematically, this dissertation evaluates three core hypotheses designed to test the limits of legislative policy, educational structure, and identity formation within the contemporary Serbian landscape:

- **Hypothesis 1**: The formal integration of native sign language within specialized educational settings remains limited by widespread teacher fluency deficits and top-down institutional restructuring, creating spaces of linguistic deprivation that force students to rely on horizontal peer networks for academic survival.
- **Hypothesis 2:** The statutory legal recognition of a minority sign language under a centralized legislative act does not automatically translate into real-world street-level empowerment when the state fails to provide localized enforcement, permanent funding, and mandatory public sector accessibility standards.
- **Hypothesis 3**: Language identity within the signing community is highly stratified and non-monolithic, operating along a contested spectrum between cultural Deaf integration and *instrumental tool pragmatism*, shaped significantly by household language background and immediate peer socialization rather than basic biological categories.

1.4. Methodology and Significance of the Study

This dissertation addresses these hypotheses through a mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design, combining deep qualitative exploration with a structured quantitative survey to build a comprehensive, multi-layered audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative phase captures the authentic, lived realities of twenty-four ($N = 24$) interviewees. These text assets were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's framework of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to map latent patterns of structural exclusion, coping mechanisms, and identity preservation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

To complement these qualitative insights, a quantitative pilot survey instrument was concurrently deployed, gathering data from a verified sample of one hundred hearing majority respondents ($N = 100$). The demographic profile of this hearing cohort represents a highly educated, urban, young-to-middle-aged cross-section of the public: 46% of respondents belong to the 26–35 age bracket, 66% identify as female, and 61% hold advanced academic qualifications, including undergraduate degrees (33%) and master's or specialist credentials (28%). Crucially, 65% of these hearing respondents state that they do not personally know a single Deaf individual.

Integrating this quantitative dataset changes the study's scope from a localized qualitative report into a robust sociolinguistic critique. The survey metrics provide the hard macro-level numbers needed to

prove that street-level exclusions are directly linked to a widespread public literacy vacuum and hidden communicative anxieties within the dominant hearing society. By demonstrating that public space barriers are maintained by a lack of state execution rather than public resistance to funding accommodations, this design provides an undeniable empirical platform for long-term policy development.

1.5. Structural Roadmap of the Inquiry

This dissertation unfolds across seven interconnected chapters designed to systematically bridge the gap between *de jure* language policy and *de facto* civic accessibility. Following this introductory framework, Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical foundations of critical sociolinguistics and macro-level language planning, which provides the conceptual lens used to evaluate the Law on the Use of Sign Language. Chapter 3 outlines the concurrent mixed-methods triangulation design, detailing the reflexive coding protocols for the qualitative lifeworld data alongside the administrative parameters of the $N = 100$ hearing majority survey.

The empirical heart of the study is situated within Chapter 4, which presents the four macro-thematic qualitative dimensions and introduces the baseline descriptive statistics table mapping public literacy and communicative anxiety. These insights are synthesized in Chapter 5, which tests the three core research hypotheses while Chapter 6 introduces a model to guide educational and public sector infrastructure reform. Finally, Chapter 7 addresses the methodological limitations of the study, outlines actionable pathways, and concludes with a reflexive positionality statement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sociolinguistics and Sign Languages

The sociolinguistics of sign languages is an intricate and dynamic field, delving deep into how various sign languages are not only structured but also used and perceived in different social contexts (Padden & Humphries, 2005; Radoman, 2012). This study area goes beyond mere linguistic features to encompass social, cultural, and interactional aspects that mold the usage and development of these languages (Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992). Sign languages, much like their spoken counterparts, exhibit a rich tapestry of diversity across different regions and communities (Blommaert, 2010; Radoman, 2012).

When we look at regional variations, for instance, we find that sign languages are as diverse as spoken languages. American Sign Language (ASL) presents an excellent example, with its signs varying significantly between the Eastern and Western United States (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). Such regional disparities are not unique to ASL. They are a common feature in other sign languages like British Sign Language (BSL) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). These variations can be quite profound, encompassing differences in handshapes, movements, or even entirely different signs for the same concept. This regional diversity is akin to the dialects found in spoken languages, offering a rich palette of linguistic expressions shaped by geographical, social, and cultural influences (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001).

Delving into the influence of social factors, we see that elements like age, ethnicity, gender, and class significantly impact the variation and usage of sign languages (Blommaert, 2010; Radoman, 2012). There is a noticeable difference in the sign language used by different generations, mirroring the generational shifts observed in spoken languages (Ladd, 2003; Radoman, 2012). In Deaf communities, the background of an individual, such as being born into a Deaf family (*native signers*) or learning sign language later in life (*late signers*), also influences their fluency and complexity in language use (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). These variations add to the richness of sign languages, reflecting the diverse experiences and histories of their users.

The interaction between sign languages and spoken languages introduces fascinating sociolinguistic phenomena, such as *code-switching* and *code-mixing* (Bishop & Hicks, 2005). Bilingual individuals often seamlessly alternate between sign language and spoken language, enriching communication through this blend. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in environments where individuals are exposed to both a national sign language (like ASL) and an oral language (like English). This bilingualism in sign language communities showcases the adaptability and flexibility of language use in different contexts (Bishop & Hicks, 2005).

For many in Deaf communities, sign language is far more than a mere communication tool; it is a cornerstone of their identity (Henner et al., 2018; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). Sign language plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and community among Deaf individuals. Henner et al. (2018) highlight how sign language strengthens cultural heritage and supports cognitive and educational development, underlining its importance in personal and cultural identity formation. Similarly, McIlroy and Storbeck (2011) illustrate how sign language is essential for expressing cultural values and navigating the development of Deaf identity within the community. This language is a symbol of belonging and an integral part of the Deaf culture, which comes with its own set of values and traditions (Padden & Humphries, 2005; Bauman & Murray, 2014). The use of sign language, therefore, is not just about communication but is also a statement about the status and identity of Deaf people in the broader societal context. This aspect of sign language as an identity marker is a powerful testament to the cultural and social significance of these languages in the lives of Deaf individuals (Padden & Humphries, 2005).

As argued by Woll and Ladd (2003), Johnston (2004), and Murray (2008), the sociolinguistic aspects of sign languages also have profound implications in the realms of language education policy and planning and education in general. The debate around the methods of educating Deaf children, such as the use of sign language versus oralism, has been a contentious issue. Policy decisions, like the official recognition of BSL in the United Kingdom in 2003, carry substantial weight in determining the status and application of sign languages in various sectors, including education, legal systems, and media. These policy and educational choices not only affect the day-to-day lives of Deaf individuals but also play a crucial role in the preservation and recognition of sign languages as rich, complex languages in their own right.

In summary, the study of the sociolinguistics of sign languages is a window into a world where language is not just heard but seen. It spans a wide array of topics from regional variations and social influences on language use to the roles of bilingualism, identity, and policy in shaping the status and evolution of these languages. Understanding these aspects is essential to fully appreciate the depth, diversity, and cultural significance of sign languages in their communities.

2.1.1. Language in Multicultural and Multilingual Contexts

A central theme in traditional sociolinguistic research is the exploration of language and identity in multicultural and multilingual settings. This research domain focuses on phenomena such as language contact, code-switching, and the development and evolution of pidgins and creoles (Muysken, 2000; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Winford, 2003). These studies offer deep insights into the linguistic intricacies of societies characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. They highlight the

adaptability and fluidity of language in response to complex social and cultural interactions (Labov, 2001; Fishman, 1991). This area of research is particularly relevant in today's globalized world, where migration and cultural exchange are common, leading to unique linguistic and social configurations (Crystal, 2003; Spolsky, 2004). By examining these phenomena, sociolinguistics contributes significantly to our understanding of linguistic diversity, language preservation, and the dynamics of language change in multicultural contexts (Myers-Scotton, 2006; Siegel, 2007).

Sign languages, as part of the linguistic landscape in multicultural and multilingual contexts, present a unique and fascinating area of study in sociolinguistics. These visual-manual languages, used primarily by Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing communities, offer insights into how language functions and evolves in different cultural settings (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2003). Unlike spoken languages, sign languages rely on visual and spatial modalities, which provide unique perspectives on linguistic structure, cognitive processing, and social interaction (Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006). Research into these languages reveals the complexity and richness of their grammar, phonology, and syntax, challenging traditional notions of what constitutes a language (Emmorey, 2002). Furthermore, the study of sign language variation and change within Deaf communities highlights how cultural and social factors influence language evolution, adaptation and individual and collective identity construction (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2003; Padden & Humphries, 1988).

In multicultural societies, sign languages often exist alongside spoken languages, forming a complex linguistic tapestry. This coexistence raises intriguing questions about language contact and interaction. For instance, just as spoken languages can influence each other through contact, sign languages can also be influenced by, and in turn influence, the surrounding spoken languages (Lucas & Valli, 1992; Pfau, Steinbach, & Woll, 2012). This interaction can lead to the development of *contact sign languages* or *mixed systems*, akin to pidgins and creoles in spoken language contexts (Adam, 2012). An illustrative example of such phenomenon can be noted in the development of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language in Israel, which evolved in a small, isolated community with a high incidence of *Deafness* (Meir et al., 2010). In this unique community, approximately 150 of the 4,000 members are Deaf, leading to the natural emergence of a fully developed sign language used by both Deaf and hearing individuals. This sign language developed independently of any national sign languages and showcases how a new language can emerge within a few generations. Sandler et al. (2005) highlight that Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language possesses its own distinct grammar and lexicon, providing a clear example of how linguistic communities can spontaneously generate new languages.

Moreover, the phenomenon of code-switching, commonly observed in multilingual communities, can also be seen in sign language users. Bilingual individuals who use both a sign language and a spoken language may switch between the two, depending on the context, audience, and purpose of

communication (Bishop & Hicks, 2005). This switching is not merely a linguistic act. It also carries social and cultural significance, reflecting the identity and affiliative choices of the individual (Grosjean, 1996; Lucas & Valli, 1992). Such individuals may be described as *bimodal bilinguals*, navigating communication across both spoken and signed modalities (Emmorey, 2002).

Just like oral languages, sign languages are not static. They evolve as they come into contact with other languages and as the needs and identities of their users change. This evolution can be observed in the development of new signs, changes in sign structure, and the emergence of regional dialects within a sign language. The dynamic nature of sign languages is evident in how new technological and cultural developments are integrated, leading to the creation of new signs and expressions (Brennan & Turner, 1994; Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006).

Furthermore, the role of sign languages in education and social inclusion in multicultural settings is of critical importance. In many parts of the world, Deaf individuals face barriers to education and social participation due to the lack of recognition and support for their language (Marschark & Spencer, 2003; Reagan, 2010). The promotion and support of sign languages in these contexts are not only a linguistic issue but also a matter of human rights and social justice (Kusters, De Meulder, & O'Brien, 2017).

In summary, the study of sign languages in multicultural and multilingual contexts offers valuable perspectives on the adaptability and resilience of language (Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). It highlights the need for inclusive language policies that recognize and support the linguistic rights of all members of society, including sign language users (Reagan, 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). This area of research underscores the importance of understanding and preserving linguistic diversity in our increasingly interconnected world, emphasizing the need for greater awareness and support for the linguistic rights of Deaf communities (Bauman & Murray, 2014; Padden & Humphries, 2005).

2.1.2. Language and Identity Construction

A foundational concept in exploring these identities within Deaf Studies and sociolinguistics is the explicit distinction between *deaf* and *Deaf*. Research on Deaf populations has long recognized that deafness cannot be understood solely as a biomedical condition defined by auditory thresholds. In Deaf Studies and sociolinguistics, *deafness* is frequently conceptualized as a phenomenon encompassing physiological, linguistic, social, and cultural dimensions (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Ladd, 2003; Leigh, 2009).

The lowercase term *deaf* typically refers to the audiological condition of hearing loss, whereas the capitalized term *Deaf* denotes identification with a cultural and linguistic minority community

organized around the use of sign language (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 2005). Scholars have emphasized that individuals with similar levels of hearing loss may occupy very different social and linguistic positions depending on their educational experiences, communication practices, and participation in Deaf social networks (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Ladd, 2003; Leigh, 2009).

Sociolinguistics, particularly through the lenses of critical sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, offers powerful frameworks for exploring how sign languages contribute to the formation, negotiation, and expression of both personal and social identities (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 2013; Padden & Humphries, 2005). These approaches allow researchers to delve into the ways in which language, as a social practice, is intertwined with identity at multiple levels: individual, communal, and institutional (Ladd, 2003; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001).

Critical sociolinguistics, with its focus on the socio-political contexts of language use, examines how identities are constructed through language in relation to power dynamics, social hierarchies, and cultural practices (Blommaert, 2005; Filipović, 2014; Filipović & Jovanović, 2025). This approach is particularly relevant when studying sign languages, as these languages are often situated within broader contexts of marginalization and resistance. For instance, the use of sign language within the Deaf community is not merely a communicative choice but a profound assertion of cultural and linguistic identity in the face of historical and ongoing oppression (Ladd, 2003). The recognition and use of sign language can thus be seen as an act of identity, where Deaf individuals and communities assert their presence, culture, and rights within a hearing-dominated society (Bauman, 2004).

Discourse analysis complements this by focusing on the micro-level interactions where identities are actively constructed and negotiated. Through the lens of discourse analysis, researchers can investigate how Deaf individuals use sign language in various social interactions to perform and negotiate their identities (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). For example, the way sign language is employed in different contexts, such as within the family, in educational settings, or in public spaces, can reveal how Deaf individuals navigate their identities in relation to others, whether aligning with or resisting dominant societal norms (Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). This analysis can uncover the subtle ways in which identity is negotiated through everyday language practices, highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of identity in sociolinguistic terms (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Historically, sign languages have been marginalized, reflecting broader societal marginalization of Deaf communities (Padden & Humphries, 2005; Ladd, 2003). This marginalization is evident in institutional settings, where sign languages are often overlooked or devalued, leading to limited access to education, healthcare, and legal systems for Deaf individuals (Bauman, 2004; Ladd, 2003). Critical sociolinguistic research into sign languages thus highlights the dynamics of recognition and

legitimization, demonstrating how linguistic policies and practices can either empower or disenfranchise Deaf communities (Bauman, 2004).

In terms of identity, critical sociolinguistics and discourse analysis provide tools for exploring how sign languages contribute to the formation and negotiation of both personal and social identities. For many Deaf individuals, sign language is not merely a means of communication, but a crucial component of their cultural and social identity, integral to the concept of *Deafhood* (Ladd, 2003; Senghas & Monaghan, 2002).

Furthermore, the intersection of sign language research with studies on gender, race, ethnicity, and social class provides deeper insights into how these identities are constructed and expressed through language (McCaskill et al., 2011). For instance, variations in sign language use across different Deaf communities can reflect and shape racial and ethnic identities, similar to spoken languages (McCaskill et al., 2011). These intersections reveal the complex ways in which sign languages contribute to identity formation, providing a nuanced understanding of the sociolinguistic landscape of Deaf communities.

Critical sociolinguistic research also has practical implications for language policy, education, and cross-cultural communication (Filipović, 2014; Filipović et al., 2007). Understanding the role of sign language in identity formation can inform the development of educational curricula and teaching methods that are inclusive of Deaf students and their linguistic needs (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). This research underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting sign languages as not just communication tools but vital elements of cultural and personal identity (Wilcox, 2000).

In summary, the study of sign languages within the frameworks of critical sociolinguistics and discourse analysis illuminates their crucial role in identity formation, social interaction, and the negotiation of power (Blommaert, 2005; Ladd, 2003; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001). This research highlights the significance of sign languages in the lives of Deaf individuals and communities, emphasizing the need to recognize and support these languages as integral components of cultural and personal identity (Padden & Humphries, 2005; Bauman, 2004).

2.2. Language Policy and Planning Frameworks

Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field that examines the processes, principles, and practices involved in managing language use within a particular community or nation (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). It encompasses both the theoretical frameworks that underpin language management and the practical strategies employed to influence language behavior among individuals and groups. The study of LPP is crucial in understanding how languages are maintained, revitalized, or marginalized in different sociopolitical contexts (Spolsky, 2009). The field draws from

various disciplines, including sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, education, political science, and sociology, to provide comprehensive insights into the dynamics of language use and regulation (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Filipović, 2015a, 2018, 2024; Filipović & Durbaba, 2014).

Historically, LPP has been dominated by top-down approaches, where governmental and institutional bodies dictate LPP initiatives (Cooper, 1989; Fishman, 1991). These policies often reflect broader socio-political objectives and are influenced by ideologies of nationalism, identity, and power (Tollefson, 1991). For example, in her work, Filipović (2015a) critiques this top-down approach by highlighting the disconnection between policymakers and practitioners, particularly in the context of Serbia. She argues for the inclusion of foreign language teachers in the policymaking process, advocating for a bottom-up approach that empowers educators to actively participate in shaping language education policies.

Language education policy (LEP) is a critical component of LPP, focusing specifically on the role of language in educational settings (Johnson, 2013). LEPs involve decisions about which languages are taught, how they are taught, and the goals of language education (Spolsky, 2004; Filipović, 2018). The Council of Europe and the European Union have been instrumental in promoting policies that support plurilingualism and intercultural competence, emphasizing the importance of learning multiple languages to enhance European mobility and communication (Vez, 2008). Despite these efforts, Filipović (2015a) points out that many national policies still fail to engage teachers in meaningful ways, resulting in a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Critical pedagogy and constructive learning are essential theoretical frameworks within LPP. These approaches emphasize the role of education in challenging existing power structures and fostering critical awareness among learners (Cummins, 2000). Critical pedagogy, as discussed by Darder (1995), views education as inherently political and advocates for teaching practices that empower students to question and transform societal norms. Constructive learning, on the other hand, focuses on creating learner-centered environments that encourage active engagement and self-directed learning (Shelton & Darling, 2003). Filipović (2015a) integrates these concepts into her vision of teacher education, arguing that foreign language teachers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to critically engage with language policies and advocate for their students' needs.

The complexity of LPP is further illustrated by the interplay between language ideologies and policy decisions. *Language ideologies* are beliefs and attitudes about language that influence how languages are perceived and valued within a society (Filipović, 2018, 2024, 2025). Milroy (2001) discusses the impact of standardization ideologies on language policies, noting that these beliefs often privilege certain language varieties over others, leading to issues of linguistic inequality and discrimination. In

Serbia, for instance, the dominance of the standard Serbian language in education has marginalized minority languages and resulted in imbalanced bilingualism (Filipović et al., 2007). This highlights the need for more inclusive and equitable language policies that recognize and support linguistic diversity.

Another critical aspect of LPP is the relationship between language policies and educational outcomes. Tollefson (2002) emphasizes that language policies are not merely neutral instruments but are deeply embedded in contested ideologies and power relations. This perspective is essential for understanding the impact of language policies on educational practices and student outcomes. For example, the promotion of English as a global lingua franca has led to its prioritization in many educational systems, often at the expense of local and indigenous languages. This has significant implications for cultural identity and linguistic heritage.

Recent studies further highlight the dynamic nature of LPP in response to globalization and migration. García and Wei (2014) explore the concept of *translanguaging* as a pedagogical approach that leverages the fluid language practices of bilingual and multilingual speakers. This approach challenges traditional notions of language separation and promotes a more holistic understanding of language use in educational settings. Similarly, Hornberger and Johnson (2007) emphasize the importance of ethnographic methods in studying LPP, advocating for research that captures the lived experiences of language users and the nuanced ways in which policies are enacted in everyday contexts.

The role of technology in LPP is also gaining attention. Warschauer (2000) examines how digital communication tools are reshaping language practices and policies, particularly in educational contexts. The integration of technology in language education has the potential to support more inclusive and flexible language learning opportunities, although it also raises questions about access and equity.

2.2.1. Language Policy and Planning for Deaf Communities

The history of LPPs for sign languages is deeply interwoven with the history of Deaf communities, a narrative marked by significant milestones, setbacks, and ongoing challenges. In the pre-20th century era, sign languages were largely unrecognized, often dismissed as rudimentary or inferior. Deaf individuals typically developed their own home signs or used local sign languages, evolving organically within Deaf communities but receiving little formal recognition.

The situation began to change with Charles-Michel de l'Épée's establishment of the first public school for the Deaf in the late 18th century. De l'Épée, recognized as the *Father of the Deaf*, developed Old French Sign Language, significantly contributing to the formal recognition of sign languages. His

approach, which embraced the natural visual-manual modality of communication among the Deaf, contrasted sharply with the prevailing views of the time (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).

However, a century later, the Milan Conference of 1880 represented a regressive turning point in Deaf education and sign language policy. This international assembly, dominated by hearing educators, endorsed oralism over sign language, leading to the widespread suppression of sign language in educational settings and contributing to the stigmatization of Deaf cultures (Grosjean, 2001). The impact of this conference was global, setting back the recognition and development of sign languages for years.

The mid-20th century heralded a period of revival and recognition for sign languages, largely thanks to William Stokoe's research at Gallaudet University. Stokoe's work in the 1960s demonstrated that ASL possessed all the characteristics of a natural language, with its own grammar and syntax, challenging misconceptions and shifting public and academic perceptions (Stokoe, 1960).

The Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet University in 1988 was another landmark event, symbolizing the Deaf community's ability to effect change and advocate for its rights. This student-led protest demanded the appointment of a Deaf president for the university, a successful endeavor that signified a significant moment in the history of the Deaf community (Gannon, 1989).

In recent decades, there has been a growing movement towards legal recognition and support of national sign languages. Countries like the United States and the UK have begun to recognize American Sign Language and British Sign Language, respectively. This legal recognition is crucial for ensuring the rights of Deaf individuals and facilitating their full participation in society (Brennan, 2005).

Education policies have evolved, shifting towards bilingual education that incorporates both local sign language and the country's written/spoken language. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring access to quality bilingual education globally (Kusters, 2015).

The World Federation of the Deaf and international bodies like the European Union and the United Nations have played significant roles in advancing the rights and recognition of sign languages. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006, underscores the importance of sign languages and the cultural identity of Deaf communities (United Nations, 2006), reflecting a growing global commitment to the rights of Deaf individuals and the recognition of sign languages as integral to their cultural and linguistic identity.

The inclusion of sign languages in LPP is essential, given the unique nature of the Deaf community as a cultural and linguistic group. This distinct community presents specific challenges and

opportunities for LPP. The decisions made in this realm for spoken languages often significantly overlap with those for sign languages, impacting the Deaf community in various ways. Key areas include the recognition of sign languages as mediums of instruction in educational settings and their official recognition as languages in their own right. Such recognition is crucial for preserving the linguistic rights and cultural identity of Deaf individuals (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).

Further emphasizing the diversity within sign languages, there are *natural sign languages, contact sign languages* (used in interactions between Deaf and hearing people), *manual sign codes* (representing spoken languages in visual formats), and *signed communication* used by hearing people in specific contexts. This variety underscores the need for nuanced LPP approaches, tailored to the specific linguistic and cultural contexts of Deaf communities (Lucas & Valli, 1992).

Other researchers have expanded upon Stokoe's work, contributing to the growing understanding of sign languages. Lucas and Valli, for example, have explored the sociolinguistic aspects of ASL, shedding light on regional variations, social registers, and the influence of factors such as age, ethnicity, and education on language use (Lucas & Valli, 1992). This research has further emphasized the complexity and diversity of sign languages, reinforcing the need for inclusive language policies that recognize and accommodate this diversity.

Moreover, research by Padden and Humphries (2005) has focused on the cultural and identity aspects of Deaf communities, highlighting the integral role of sign languages in Deaf culture. Their work underscores the importance of LPP in supporting the cultural and linguistic rights of Deaf individuals.

In summary, the evolution of LPP to include sign languages, significantly influenced by Stokoe's pioneering work, underscores a growing recognition of the linguistic complexity and cultural importance of these languages. The work of Stokoe and subsequent researchers like Lucas, Valli, Padden, and Humphries has been instrumental in shaping policies that acknowledge and support the linguistic rights and cultural identity of Deaf communities.

2.2.2 European Legislative and Policy Frameworks

The evolution of legislative and policy frameworks in Europe concerning the rights and recognition of Deaf individuals and the use of sign languages represents a profound shift towards inclusivity and acknowledgment of linguistic diversity. This journey began significantly in 1988 with the European Parliament Resolution, which was a groundbreaking step in recognizing the linguistic rights of the Deaf community (European Parliament, 1988). Prior to this, sign languages were often marginalized and not considered true languages in many societies. The resolution's impact was multi-dimensional. It not only recognized sign languages as complete languages but also underscored the importance of making these languages accessible in public life (European Parliament, 1988). It called upon member

states to actively support and facilitate the use of sign languages, emphasizing the need for sign language education and the training of qualified interpreters (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999). This was not just a symbolic gesture; it had practical implications, leading to the development of educational programs and interpreter training courses across Europe (Ladd, 2003). Additionally, it set a precedent for future policies and legislation, creating a domino effect in which the rights and needs of the Deaf community began to be increasingly recognized in other legislative frameworks (Kusters et al., 2017). This resolution marked the beginning of a new era of language equality and accessibility in Europe, shaping the way sign languages and the Deaf community are perceived and integrated into society (Johnston & Schembri, 2007).

The European Union of the Deaf (EUD), established in 1985, has played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of Deaf individuals. As a pan-European, non-profit organization, the EUD has been instrumental in bringing the issues faced by the Deaf community to the forefront of EU policy-making. Their relentless efforts have ensured that the concerns and needs of the Deaf community are not only heard but also acted upon at the EU level. The EUD's work encompasses a broad range of activities, from lobbying and advocacy to research and project implementation (European Union of the Deaf, n.d.-a). They have been actively involved in numerous initiatives aimed at improving the lives of Deaf individuals, including efforts to enhance access to education, employment, and public services. One of the key achievements of the EUD has been its success in influencing the formulation of EU policies concerning the recognition and support of sign languages. This includes working closely with EU institutions and member states to ensure the implementation of policies and directives that positively impact the Deaf community (European Union of the Deaf, n.d.-b). Their advocacy extends beyond legislative change, focusing also on raising public awareness about the cultural and linguistic identity of the Deaf community. The EUD's contribution has been fundamental in shaping a more inclusive and equitable EU, where the rights of Deaf individuals are recognized and upheld (European Union of the Deaf, n.d.-c).

The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked a monumental shift in the international approach to disability rights, including the rights of Deaf individuals (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD was the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century and the first legally binding instrument at the international level to specifically address the needs of people with disabilities. Its adoption by the EU and its member states signified a commitment to a new paradigm in disability rights, moving away from a model of charity and medicalization towards one that emphasizes human rights and social inclusion. Article 21 of the CRPD, which mandates the facilitation of sign languages, is particularly significant. It not only acknowledges the importance of sign languages for the freedom of expression and access to

information for Deaf individuals but also obliges state parties to ensure that sign languages are given equal status with spoken languages (United Nations, 2006).

This has profound implications for policy and practice, necessitating changes in national laws and the attitudes of societies towards Deaf individuals and their languages. The CRPD also covers various other aspects critical to the lives of Deaf people, such as accessibility, personal mobility, health, education, and employment. By ratifying the CRPD, member states have committed to making concrete changes to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are respected and upheld, marking a significant step forward in the global recognition and support for the Deaf community (United Nations, 2006).

The EU Accessibility Directive (European Union, 2016), enacted in 2016, represents a significant advance in the EU's commitment to creating an inclusive society for people with disabilities, including Deaf individuals. This directive is aimed at ensuring that public sector websites and mobile applications are accessible to people with disabilities. The directive's importance lies in its specific focus on digital accessibility, addressing various aspects of website and app design to consider the needs of people with disabilities. By including provisions for accessible communication, the directive implicitly recognizes the importance of sign language interpretation and accessible information technologies. This has wide-ranging implications for the Deaf community, as it ensures that critical services and information are accessible in sign language, thus enabling full and equal participation in society. The directive also sets out clear standards and guidelines for accessibility, ensuring that public sector bodies understand and implement the necessary measures to make their digital services accessible. Furthermore, it provides a framework for monitoring and enforcing compliance, ensuring that the rights of people with disabilities are protected (European Union, 2016). The directive has been a key driver in the push towards a more accessible Europe, where the needs of all individuals, including those who are Deaf, are considered and accommodated.

Similarly, the European Accessibility Act (EAA) of 2019 (European Union, 2019) marked another stride forward in enhancing the accessibility of services and products for people with disabilities. This act is a comprehensive piece of legislation that covers a wide range of products and services, including e-readers, computers, smartphones, and banking services. The EAA's significance lies in its broad scope and its focus on improving access to the digital world for people with disabilities. For sign language users, this is particularly crucial as it means better access to digital content and services, which are often essential for information, communication, and participation in the modern world. The act also plays a key role in standardizing accessibility requirements across the EU, ensuring that products and services are designed with the needs of people with disabilities in mind from the outset. This not only benefits the Deaf community but also contributes to the creation of a more inclusive

digital environment for all. The EAA also emphasizes the importance of involving people with disabilities in the development of accessible technologies and services, recognizing that their input is crucial in ensuring that these technologies truly meet their needs. This act represents a significant step in the EU's efforts to build a barrier-free environment and has been instrumental in driving innovation and progress in the field of accessibility (European Union, 2019).

Collectively, these legislative and policy developments over the last three decades have significantly contributed to creating a more inclusive and accessible environment for Deaf individuals within the EU. They reflect an evolving understanding and appreciation of the Deaf community and their languages and signify a commitment to ensuring that Deaf individuals enjoy the same rights and opportunities as their hearing counterparts (European Union, 2016; European Union, 2019). These developments are not just about changing laws. They represent a broader shift in attitudes and perceptions towards the Deaf community, promoting equality, respect, and recognition of the rich linguistic and cultural diversity that sign languages bring to our society (European Union, 2016; European Union, 2019).

2.2.3 Language Education Policy and Planning in Serbia

LEP is often categorized as one of the three main components of general LPP, along with status planning and corpus planning (Filipović et al., 2007; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). LEP typically involves decisions made by state and educational institutions regarding which languages will be taught, the frameworks for curriculum development, and the criteria for teacher education and training (Filipović, 2015a, 2015b; Spolsky, 2004). In Serbia, the selection of languages for education is heavily influenced by social, political, cultural, and historical factors.

According to Filipović (2015a) and Filipović et al. (2007), post-World War II educational policy in Yugoslavia, and subsequently Serbia, aimed at fostering a sense of unity while recognizing the distinctiveness of various ethnic communities. This period saw the introduction of Russian as a compulsory foreign language and the promotion of minority languages (Škiljan, 1988; Točanac, 1990, as cited in Filipović, 2015a). This policy framework sought to balance national cohesion with the preservation and promotion of minority languages, reflecting a complex interplay of political and cultural goals.

The breakup of Yugoslavia brought about significant changes in LEPs. Languages such as English, German, French, and later Spanish and Italian became more prominent in the curriculum, reflecting broader global and European trends (Filipović, 2015b). Despite this shift, the importance of minority languages in education continued to be recognized, though the implementation varied according to regional and political dynamics (Filipović et al., 2007). This shift illustrates how language policies

are often reactive to socio-political changes, with different languages gaining prominence in response to external influences and internal developments.

Filipović (2015b) underscores that LEPs are influenced by economic, political, and cultural orientations of local communities. This interaction often results in contested ideologies towards different languages within the society (Tollefson, 2002, as cited in Filipović, 2015b). In Serbia, for instance, educational laws stipulate that formal education can be conducted in Serbian as L1, Serbian as L2 (for members of ethnolinguistic minorities), and in recognized minority languages. However, the practical implementation of these policies often leads to imbalanced bilingualism or language shift towards the majority language, complicating the intended goals of preserving minority languages (Filipović et al., 2007). This phenomenon of *subtractive bilingualism*, where the minority language is undermined in favor of the dominant language, poses significant challenges for the sustainability of linguistic diversity (Mikes, 2001, as cited in Filipović, 2015a).

Moreover, the top-down approach to LEP often fails to incorporate the perspectives and active roles of foreign language teachers, who are crucial in the actual implementation of these policies (Johnson, 2013). Filipović (2015a) advocates for a *multilateral and multidimensional* approach to LEP that includes bottom-up contributions from teachers, supported by critical pedagogy and constructive learning methodologies. This approach aligns with the Council of Europe and European Union's emphasis on plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, and intercultural competence as essential elements of language education (Vez, 2008, as cited in Filipović, 2015a).

Empirical research further supports the need for teachers' active involvement in LEP. For instance, Bhattacharya et al. (2007) highlight the significant impact teachers have on the practical outcomes of language policies through their everyday teaching practices. This underscores the necessity of empowering teachers to take an active role in policy formulation to ensure that educational practices align with the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of their communities.

In conclusion, LEP in Serbia reflects the broader social and political landscape, balancing between the demands for national unity and the need to accommodate linguistic diversity. This approach, however, is fraught with challenges, particularly in achieving the desired educational outcomes and maintaining linguistic diversity within a unified national framework (Filipović, 2015a). Effective LEP requires the integration of both top-down and bottom-up approaches, recognizing the critical role of educators and the sociocultural dynamics at play.

2.2.3.1 Legislative Milestones and Implementation Challenges

The legislative framework for language education in Serbia has undergone various reforms. Key legal instruments include the Law on the Fundamentals of Education System (Official Gazette of the

Republic of Serbia No. 72/2009, 52/2011, 55/2013 and 62/2016), the Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 55/2013), and the Bylaws on More Specific Conditions for the Implementation of Bilingual Teaching (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 105/2015 and 50/2016). These laws and regulations aim to support the use of minority languages in education, reflecting commitments under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by Serbia in 2005 (Filipović, 2015a; Vučo & Begović, 2014).

The Law on the Fundamentals of Education System (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 72/2009, 52/2011, 55/2013 and 62/2016) defines the general principles and goals of education in Serbia, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and the right to education in one's mother tongue for national minorities. The Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 55/2013) further specifies the implementation of primary education in minority languages where there is sufficient demand and available resources.

The Bylaws on More Specific Conditions for the Implementation of Bilingual Teaching (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 105/2015 and 50/2016) establish the detailed conditions for conducting bilingual education in Serbian and minority languages, as well as foreign languages. This includes criteria for teacher qualifications, student language proficiency levels, and the overall framework for curriculum development in bilingual settings (Vučo & Begović, 2014).

These legislative measures are part of Serbia's commitment to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which mandates the promotion and protection of minority languages in various domains, including education (Filipović, 2015b). Despite these frameworks, practical challenges remain in ensuring the effective implementation of bilingual and minority language education, including the availability of qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials (Filipović, 2015b).

Despite these legislative efforts, practical challenges remain. The implementation of bilingual education, for instance, has faced obstacles such as a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and political resistance from some minority groups. This has sometimes led to subtractive bilingualism, where students from minority communities struggle with Serbian proficiency, limiting their social mobility and academic success (Filipović et al., 2007). Moreover, there are instances where the practical application of policies does not align with the intended goals, as seen in the case of minority languages being used minimally in formal education despite legislative support.

In particular, the resistance from certain national minority groups to the introduction of bilingual education programs, especially those that would include Serbian and minority languages, has been a significant barrier (Filipović & Vučo, 2018). The argument put forth by some minority representatives is that bilingual education might threaten the preservation of their languages and cultural identities,

fearing that it could lead to assimilation rather than integration (Filipović & Vučo, 2018). This stance has resulted in the exclusion of minority languages from bilingual education frameworks, which are otherwise applied to major world languages like English and French alongside Serbian (Filipović & Vučo, 2018). This exclusion is not only seen as discriminatory but also detrimental to the potential cognitive and academic benefits that an additive bilingual model could offer (Filipović & Vučo, 2018). Such a model would enable the simultaneous and purposeful development of both the minority language and Serbian, thereby fostering greater communicative and academic competencies across linguistic communities (Filipović & Vučo, 2018).

Furthermore, this reluctance to embrace bilingual education involving minority languages has wider implications for educational equity and social cohesion. For marginalized groups like the Roma, the absence of bilingual education that includes their native language reinforces their marginalization, both within the education system and the broader society (Filipović & Vučo, 2018). The lack of recognition and support for minority languages in education diminishes the linguistic and cultural capital of these communities, which could otherwise contribute significantly to the social fabric of the country (Filipović & Vučo, 2018).

This issue is similarly relevant to the Deaf community in Serbia, where SSL has struggled to gain proper recognition and inclusion in the educational system. Despite being legally recognized, SSL faces challenges similar to those of spoken minority languages, including insufficient resources, a shortage of qualified educators fluent in SSL, and limited integration into mainstream education (Raičević Bajić et al., 2021).

In this context, the need for a reimagined bilingual education model that incorporates minority languages, including SSL, is evident. Such a model would view linguistic diversity as a societal asset rather than a challenge, promoting greater inclusion, equity, and cohesion across all linguistic communities in Serbia (Filipović & Vučo, 2018).

2.2.3.2 Sociopolitical and Ideological Considerations

Language policies in Serbia are deeply intertwined with sociopolitical ideologies. Decisions regarding language education often reflect broader societal values and strategic cultural beliefs. For instance, the dominance of Serbian as the official language and the inclusion of minority languages are influenced by political considerations and the desire to promote national unity while respecting cultural diversity (Filipović, 2015b).

Similarly, the status and recognition of SSL is affected by these sociopolitical factors. The legal recognition of SSL marked a significant milestone for the Deaf community in Serbia, aligning with international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,

which Serbia ratified (United Nations, 2006). This recognition aimed to promote inclusivity and equal rights, reflecting broader goals of social inclusion and diversity.

However, the level of support and resources allocated to SSL can vary, influenced by political priorities and societal attitudes towards the Deaf community (Savić, 2005). The fluctuating emphasis on different languages in Serbia's policy landscape mirrors the challenges faced by SSL, where sustained efforts are needed to ensure the Deaf community's linguistic rights are upheld (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999).

In conclusion, just as Serbia's language policies for spoken languages reflect its sociopolitical landscape, the status and support for sign languages like SSL are similarly shaped by these broader ideological and cultural dynamics. Recognizing and promoting SSL is part of a larger commitment to linguistic and cultural diversity, requiring continuous advocacy and adaptation to the changing political and societal context (Filipović, 2015b; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999).

2.2.3.3 Recent Developments and Future Directions

Recent legislative developments, such as the 2015 Law on Sign Language Use (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 38/2015), mark significant progress in recognizing the linguistic and cultural rights of the Deaf community in Serbia. This law, along with the Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia by 2030 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 63/2021), aims to integrate SSL into the education system, enhancing accessibility and inclusion for Deaf students. The ongoing efforts to standardize SSL and develop educational materials tailored to Deaf students reflect a broader commitment to linguistic diversity and equity in education.

Filipović's (2015a) analysis of the evolution of language policies highlights the need for a balanced approach that considers both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This involves not only implementing policies at the national level but also engaging local communities and educators in the decision-making process to ensure that policies are effective and culturally sensitive (Filipović, 2015a).

This balanced approach is equally crucial for sign languages. The recognition and support of sign languages require national-level policies that ensure legal recognition, funding for interpreter services, and inclusion in education and public services (Napoli & Sutton-Spence, 2014). However, effective implementation also depends on the active involvement of local Deaf communities, educators, and sign language users (Kusters et al., 2017).

Moreover, bottom-up initiatives can drive the development of resources and training programs for sign languages, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment. For instance, community-led

workshops and advocacy efforts can enhance the visibility and status of sign language within a society (Ladd, 2003). By combining top-down mandates with grassroots advocacy and input, Serbia can create a more robust and responsive framework for supporting SSL, enhancing its status and ensuring the linguistic rights of the Deaf community are upheld (Filipović, 2015a; Kusters et al., 2017; Napier et al., 2010; Ladd, 2003).

In conclusion, the evolution of LPP in Serbia demonstrates a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. While significant progress has been made in legislative frameworks, practical implementation continues to face challenges. The active involvement of educators and continuous policy refinement are essential to achieving a more inclusive and effective language education system in Serbia.

2.3. History of Deaf Education

The history of Deaf education is a complex and evolving story, marked by significant developments, controversies, and milestones. Understanding the historical context of Deaf education requires examining the LPPs that have shaped it (Lane, 1992). These policies have influenced not only the methods and approaches used in Deaf education but also the societal attitudes towards Deaf individuals (Ladd, 2003). In its early stages, formal education for Deaf individuals was virtually non-existent (Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). *Deafness* was often stigmatized, with Deaf people viewed as incapable of education or religious instruction, and excluded from society in some cultures (Lane, 1984). In this environment, ad-hoc sign systems developed within families and local communities served as basic means of communication, laying the groundwork for more formalized sign languages (Sacks, 1990; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989).

Among early pioneers like Pedro Ponce de León in 16th century Spain, the focus was largely on teaching speech and lip-reading, adhering to the belief that oral language was superior to sign language (Lane, 1984). However, a significant shift occurred in the 18th century with the emergence of formal Deaf education, led by innovative educators such as Charles-Michel de l'Épée in France. De l'Épée's revolutionary approach, which utilized methodical signs to teach French grammar and concepts, marked the beginning of formal recognition and development of sign languages (Edwards, 2012).

In contrast, Samuel Heinicke in Germany established an oral school for the Deaf that emphasized speech and lip-reading, reflecting a different philosophy that aimed to integrate Deaf individuals into the hearing world. This divergence in methodologies set the stage for future debates in Deaf education (Plann, 1997).

The Milan Conference of 1880, advocating for oralism and rejecting sign language, had a profound impact, leading to the suppression of sign language in educational settings and the marginalization of Deaf cultures (Grosjean, 2001). This dark period in Deaf history saw poor academic outcomes for Deaf students and a decline in the development of Deaf communities and sign languages.

The tide began to turn in the 20th century, notably with William Stokoe's research at Gallaudet University in the 1960s. Stokoe's work, which established ASL as a legitimate language, played a crucial role in shifting attitudes and methodologies in Deaf education (Stokoe, 1960). The latter half of the century saw the emergence of the *Bilingual-Bicultural (Bi-Bi) approach*, recognizing the importance of both sign language and the written/spoken language of the broader society (Mahshie, 1995).

Technological advancements like hearing aids and cochlear implants brought new possibilities and controversies to Deaf education, with debates centering around their impact on Deaf culture and sign language. Other technologies, such as video communication and text-to-speech software, offered alternative educational tools for the Deaf (Marschark & Spencer, 2003).

Legislation and advocacy have played significant roles in advancing Deaf education. Laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States have ensured educational rights for Deaf children, while the Deaf rights movement has been instrumental in advocating for the recognition of sign languages and the rights of Deaf individuals (Gannon, 2004).

Today, the field of Deaf education is characterized by its diversity and continued evolution, with a range of educational options available to Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students. However, challenges such as ensuring access to quality education and preserving Deaf culture remain. Future developments will likely continue to be influenced by ongoing debates around identity, technology, and methodology.

In conclusion, the history of Deaf education reflects a journey from exclusion and misunderstanding to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of *Deafness* and communication. It is a narrative of resilience, innovation, and advocacy, underscoring the evolving nature of education, societal attitudes, and the Deaf community's fight for equality and recognition.

2.3.1. Deaf Education in Serbia

Raičević Bajić et al. (2021, 2022) divided the history and development into four main periods – from late 19th century to 1945, from 1945 to 1991, from 1991 to 2015 and the period after 2015. The trajectory of Deaf education in Serbia is emblematic of a complex interplay between sociopolitical dynamics, pedagogical philosophies, and advocacy for disability rights. This scholarly examination

embarks on a critical exploration of the historical progression of Deaf education from its inception in the late 19th century through to the contemporary era. It seeks to delineate the legislative landmarks, shifts in educational paradigms, and the evolving societal perceptions that have collectively influenced and shaped the Deaf community's educational landscape in Serbia. By dissecting these multifaceted dimensions, this section provides an in-depth understanding of the challenges, triumphs, and ongoing efforts in the realm of Deaf education within the Serbian context.

2.3.1.1. The Foundational Period (Late 19th Century to 1945)

The origins of formal Deaf education in Serbia trace back to the late 19th century. The decision to send Ljubomir Miladinović and Kosta Nikolić to Berlin in 1882 for training in Deaf education represents Serbia's early acknowledgment of the need for specialized pedagogical approaches (Savić, 2005). Their education resulted in the implementation of the oralist method, i.e. *the German method* invented by Samuel Heinicke.

Despite the postponement, individual endeavors like Radivoje Popović's failed attempt in 1885 and Jovan Boljarić's more successful initiative in 1887 laid the groundwork for future institutional efforts. The opening of the Stefan Dečanski school in 1896 marked a critical turning point in providing a structured educational environment for Deaf children (Savić, 2015).

2.3.1.2. The Yugoslav Era (1945 - 1991)

The aftermath of World War II heralded significant changes in Deaf education within the broader Yugoslav context. The establishment of the Union of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing of Yugoslavia signaled a new era of organization and advocacy. This period, however, was characterized by the dominance of oralism in Deaf education, marginalizing sign language and focusing on speech and lip-reading techniques. Regardless, they did substantial educational and publishing work, trying to combat high illiteracy (80%) within the Deaf community (Savić, 2005).

Despite these challenges, the era fostered a strong community bond among Deaf individuals. The official education system gradually integrated Serbo-Croatian, though it fell short of acknowledging the Yugoslav Sign Language or its varieties before the 1990s (Savić, 2005).

2.3.1.3. The Period of Transition (1991 - 2015)

This period was crucial, witnessing the inception of the nation's first interpreting agencies, the advent of inclusive education, and the significant ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on December 13, 2006. Inclusive education initiated notable changes, transforming special schools for Deaf children into institutions catering to various special needs, thereby diminishing the number of Deaf students in these schools. This decrease was further

influenced by the rising trend of mainstreaming Deaf children with cochlear implants without sign language support (United Nations, 2006).

Until 2009, the curricula for the Deaf students were the same as the special education ones. This resulted in reduced content with no consideration for SSL, Deaf culture or assistive tools that facilitate understanding. Special needs educationalists were present in their learning through their primary and secondary education. Since Deaf schools lost their status as institutions for exclusively Deaf students, the primary language of instruction was Serbian and SSL was demoted.

There was, however, a genuine effort to introduce an elective SSL course at the Stefan Dečanski elementary school for the Deaf between 2001 and 2003. Unfortunately, the course was canceled due to immense disapproval of the teaching staff (Raičević Bajić, Nikolić et al., 2021).

During this period, SSL remained largely undocumented in linguistic research, and there was a conspicuous absence of SSL educational resources for both teachers and interpreters (Bickford, 2005). Despite these gaps, the Serbian Association of the Deaf pioneered an annual seven-day seminar on SSL from 1997 onwards, offering a pathway for interpreters to achieve certification through an examination process (Allen & Walters, 2007). However, the dearth of formal interpreter training led to a prevalent machine (conduit) philosophy approach among Serbian interpreters, often children of Deaf adults, focusing more on the quantity of signs rather than their meaning. Allen and Walters (2007) also highlighted a prevailing belief in the limited vocabulary of SSL, underscoring an ideology that mistakenly viewed SSL as an inferior communication form rather than a full-fledged language.

A paradigm shift in language ideology began to surface around 2004, spurred by growing awareness of the cultural-linguistic model of *Deafness* (Raičević Bajić et al., 2021). This model champions Deaf identity, the use of national SLs, and a unique cultural framework encompassing beliefs, history, and art. This shift was notably influenced by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Survey team's visit to the Balkans in 2004, including Serbia and neighboring countries, aiming to assess the status and conditions of the Deaf population. The culmination of this two-year project was the seminal Deaf People in the Balkans Forum in Belgrade in 2006 (Raičević Bajić et al., 2021). This event marked a historic turning point, recognizing SSL as legitimate languages and distinguishing them from mere gestural communication. The Forum played a crucial role in empowering the Deaf community.

In a decisive move towards international alignment, Serbia ratified the UN's CRPD in 2009, equating sign languages with spoken languages. This act provided impetus for the National Association to advocate for the legal recognition of SSL. After extensive efforts, the Serbian National Assembly passed the Law on the Use of Sign Language on April 28, 2015, as documented in the Official Gazette

of the Republic of Serbia, No. 38/2015, marking a monumental step forward in the recognition and empowerment of the Deaf community in Serbia.

Article 3 of the law states that sign language is a natural form of communication for Deaf people that has its own linguistic properties, including grammatical functions, phonology, morphology, and syntax (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 38/2015).

The Law on Sign Language Use covers the following key points:

- Regulation of sign language use and rights to learning and interpreter services.
- Upholding non-discrimination and equality principles for persons with disabilities.
- Rights to use sign language in education, employment, and political activities.
- Provision and accessibility of sign language interpreter services.
- Promoting sign language in media and telecommunication.
- Responsibilities of public services and organizations in sign language development and standardization.

This law was the result of a project launched by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs in 2009. The working group had four subgroups, all assigned different tasks. The majority of the working groups consisted of hearing members with little to no knowledge of SSL. (Raičević Bajić & Nikolić, 2022) Most aspects of these projects were transparent to neither the academic community nor the public which raises doubts in terms of relevance and true efforts.

2.3.1.4. Recent Developments and the Action Plan (Post-2015)

The period following 2015 has been marked by progressive legislative and policy initiatives. The Law on the Use of Sign Language was a pivotal development, affirming the linguistic and cultural significance of sign language.

Moreover, the 2030 Education Strategy of Serbia, formulated by the Ministry of Education, represents a pivotal inclusion of SSL in the education of Deaf students. This strategy (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 63/2021), revised every decade, provides an extensive review of existing educational legislation, both domestic and international, evaluates the current state of Serbian education, and outlines future objectives for primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels. It specifically addresses the challenges Deaf students face in accessing education in their mother tongue, recognizing the inadequacies in support and system accessibility. The strategy sets both general and specific objectives to enhance the educational experience and achievements of Deaf students. These include the development of SSL-adjusted educational materials, comprehensive research and standardization of SSL, and increased support for Deaf students in higher education through SSL

interpreting services. In Article 10, the accompanying Action Plan until 2023 focuses on improving teaching and learning conditions at the pre-university level and ensuring greater equality in higher education by revising legislation to define responsibilities for providing SSL interpreting services.

The historical trajectory of Deaf education in Serbia reflects a journey from marginalization to empowerment. The progress, though gradual and fraught with challenges, illustrates a transformative shift in societal attitudes and policy approaches towards the Deaf community (Raičević Bajić et al., 2021, 2022; Allen & Walters, 2007). Today, with the recognition of sign language and the implementation of inclusive educational strategies, Serbia stands on the cusp of a new era of accessibility and equality in education for Deaf individuals (Bickford, 2005; United Nations, 2006). The ongoing efforts and strategic planning underscore a commitment to ensuring that Deaf students not only have access to education but also thrive within a system that acknowledges and respects their unique linguistic and cultural identity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore the dynamics of language identity and LPP within the SSL community. The study was framed within the discipline of sociolinguistics, focusing on how language functions as a crucial element of identity, especially within minority communities like the Deaf community in Serbia (Filipović, 2015b). The research aimed to understand how the official recognition and subsequent integration of SSL in Serbian society influences the community's cultural identity, educational outcomes, and social empowerment (Filipović, 2015b; Padden & Humphries, 2005).

Given the nature of these objectives, a qualitative research methodology was selected as it allowed for an in-depth examination of the lived experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of the SSL community members (Raičević Bajić et al., 2021). Qualitative research was particularly suited to this study because it enabled the researcher to capture the richness of individual narratives and to analyze how these narratives reflected broader social, cultural, and policy-related trends (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Brennan, 2005).

This methodology section details the research design, including the choice of a qualitative approach and a case study design, the methods for data collection and analysis, ethical considerations specific to working with a minority and vulnerable community, the limitations of the study, and strategies employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Each aspect of the methodology was carefully designed to align with the study's overarching goals and theoretical framework.

3.1. Research Design and Pragmatic Grounding

3.1.1. Qualitative Intrinsic Case Study Research Approach

The research adopted a qualitative approach, which was essential for exploring the complex and multifaceted nature of language identity and policy within the SSL community. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to quantify phenomena and generalize findings across larger populations, qualitative research focused on understanding the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of individuals within specific contexts (Filipović, 2015b). This approach was particularly appropriate for this study as it allowed for an exploration of how SSL users experienced and interpreted the influence of language policy on their identities and social lives (Padden & Humphries, 2005).

Qualitative research is inherently flexible, which proved beneficial in this study given the exploratory nature of the inquiry. This flexibility allowed the researcher to respond to new insights and themes as they emerged during data collection and analysis, ensuring that the study remained responsive to the complexities of the participants' lived experiences (Lucas, Bayley & Valli, 2001). Unlike quantitative

methods, which often impose rigid frameworks, qualitative approaches embrace the dynamic and evolving nature of human behavior and interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This flexibility was reflected in the iterative nature of the research, where methods and focus areas could be adjusted to address unexpected findings (Flick, 2018). For example, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to adapt questions based on participants' responses, enabling the discovery of unanticipated information and themes (Holmes, 2013).

Finally, the data collected in this study would be analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2013), as it provides a structured yet flexible approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for the systematic examination of participants' meanings and experiences while remaining adaptable to emerging insights. A more detailed explanation of the thematic analysis process and its application in this study is provided in subsequent sections.

To operationalize this flexible qualitative approach, this inquiry specifically adopts a case study design. Case studies offer a detailed examination of specific instances, individuals, or groups within their real-life context, providing a rich understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). For instance, a case study might explore how a particular community navigates linguistic shifts due to migration or globalization (Baxter & Jack, 2008). By focusing on one group's experience, researchers can uncover how cultural identity, language preservation, and societal integration interact in complex ways (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of contextual influences, such as socioeconomic factors or power dynamics, that might shape individuals' behaviors and decisions (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). For example, a case study on a bilingual education program might reveal the challenges and successes in balancing heritage language retention with second language acquisition, providing valuable insights into educational policies and policies (Duff, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

This study employed an intrinsic case study design, which was particularly well-suited to its objectives. An intrinsic case study focuses on understanding a specific case for its own sake, rather than to generalize findings or develop broader theories (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). The aim is to delve deeply into the unique aspects of the case, emphasizing its particularities and significance (Yin, 2018).

In this research, the Serbian Deaf community and its use of SSL were examined as a distinct and meaningful case. The intrinsic case study approach was appropriate because the focus was on understanding the specific sociolinguistic and cultural dynamics of SSL within this community, rather than using the case as an example of broader phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This method allowed

the study to illuminate the particular ways in which SSL contributes to identity formation and is influenced by language policies, providing a rich, context-specific understanding of its role (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The intrinsic nature of this case study ensured that the research remained deeply engaged with the specificities of SSL, capturing its unique sociocultural and linguistic significance within the Serbian Deaf community. By prioritizing the case itself, the study generated insights that honor the distinctiveness of SSL while contributing valuable knowledge to the field of sociolinguistics and language policy research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3.1.2. Exploratory Grounded Design and Justification

Given the relatively under-researched status of SSL within the field of sociolinguistics and LPP, this study was exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is defined as a systematic investigation aimed at gaining insights into phenomena that are not yet well understood, often serving as a foundation for further, more detailed inquiries (Stebbins, 2001). It is particularly valuable in contexts where existing knowledge is limited, as it enables researchers to examine new phenomena, uncover patterns, and generate hypotheses for subsequent research (Stebbins, 2001). In this study, the exploratory approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how SSL functions as both a linguistic and cultural tool within the Deaf community and how language policies impact this dual role (Brennan, 2005; Raičević Bajić et al., 2021). By employing this approach, the research not only addressed critical gaps in the literature but also contributed to a broader understanding of SSL's sociolinguistic and policy dimensions.

The exploratory design also allowed the study to be adaptive. As the research progressed, the findings revealed unexpected aspects of SSL's role in identity formation and social policy, which the research design accommodated. This approach was critical for capturing the full scope of SSL's impact within its sociocultural context.

A grounded theory approach further enhanced the adaptability of the research design. Grounded theory focuses on generating theory directly from data rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks, making it particularly suited for exploratory studies like this one (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through iterative cycles of data collection and analysis, patterns and themes related to SSL's influence on identity formation and its integration into social policy emerged organically. This methodology allowed the study to remain open to novel insights and ensured that the resulting theory was firmly rooted in the lived experiences of SSL users (Charmaz, 2006). The constant comparative method, a core component of grounded theory, facilitated the identification and refinement of categories as new data were integrated, offering a comprehensive understanding of SSL's multifaceted sociocultural impact (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Incorporating grounded theory into the study ensured that the research remained dynamic and responsive, capable of accommodating unexpected findings about SSL's role in shaping identity and informing social policy within its unique sociocultural framework.

The qualitative, exploratory, and case study design was well-suited to the objectives of this research. The qualitative approach was essential for capturing the subjective and deeply personal aspects of language identity, which quantitative methods may overlook. The exploratory nature of the study allowed the research to remain open to new findings and insights, which is critical given the limited existing research on SSL (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). Finally, the case study design provided the contextual depth and specificity needed to thoroughly explore how language policies influence identity within the Serbian Deaf community (Yin, 2018).

By combining these approaches, the research design was equipped to address the complexities of language policy and identity in a minority language community, providing valuable insights that could inform both academic understanding and practical policy-making (Woll & Ladd, 2003).

3.1.3. Quantitative Triangulation Phase

To complement the qualitative parameters of this case study, a quantitative pilot survey instrument was integrated into the research design, transitioning the project into a concurrent mixed-methods triangulation framework (Bryman, 2012). While the primary qualitative phase deepens our understanding of the lived experiences and institutional traumas of twenty-four native and school-acquired signers, this quantitative element captures the language ideologies, literacy levels, and policy viewpoints of the dominant hearing majority. Measuring these variables is vital, as public sector attitudes directly shape the street-level policy environment and determine the social positioning of a minoritized language space (Woll & Ladd, 2003).

The pilot questionnaire was deployed digitally and generated a verified dataset of one hundred hearing respondents ($N = 100$) (see Appendix C). The demographic profile of this hearing cohort represents a highly educated, urban, young-to-middle-aged cross-section of the public: 46% of respondents belong to the 26–35 age bracket, 66% identify as female, and 61% hold advanced academic qualifications, including undergraduate degrees (33%) and master's or specialist credentials (28%). Crucially, 65% of these hearing respondents state that they do not personally know a single Deaf individual. By gathering explicit metrics on public awareness, interactive comfort levels, and support for financial resource allocation, this dataset provides the macro-sociolinguistic backdrop necessary to evaluate the systemic audist gatekeeping practices encountered by signing youth in Serbia (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

3.1.4. Methodological Validity and Operationalization of Identity Measures

The use of self-reported identity measures is well established in sociolinguistic research, particularly in studies examining language use, language attitudes, and language policy. Sociolinguistics has long emphasized that linguistic behavior is closely linked to speakers' social identities and their own perception of social group membership, rather than solely to externally defined demographic categories (Labov, 2001; Eckert, 2012). Because language practices are shaped by how individuals position themselves within social and cultural communities, self-identification provides an important methodological tool for capturing these subjective dimensions of linguistic identity.

In research involving Deaf communities, the relevance of self-reported identity measures is particularly pronounced. Scholars have consistently argued that *Deafness* cannot be adequately understood solely through audiological criteria, as hearing level does not necessarily determine linguistic practices, cultural affiliation, or community membership (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Ladd, 2003). Individuals with similar degrees of hearing loss may differ substantially in their language use, social networks, and cultural identification depending on factors such as education, family background, and exposure to sign language.

As a result, Deaf Studies research frequently distinguishes between audiological status and Deaf cultural identity, recognizing that the latter is largely defined through participation in sign-language-based communities and shared cultural practices (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Ladd, 2003). From this perspective, self-identification becomes a crucial methodological indicator of how individuals situate themselves within the Deaf–hearing continuum. Identity research within Deaf populations has similarly relied on self-report instruments to measure affiliation with Deaf and hearing cultures. For example, the *Deaf Acculturation Scale* developed by Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011) uses self-reported measures of language use, social networks, and cultural identification to assess individuals' orientation toward Deaf and hearing communities. Such approaches reflect the understanding that identity is not a fixed attribute but rather a socially constructed and context-dependent process (Leigh, 2009).

Because of these complexities, many researchers studying Deaf communities rely on self-reported identity and language-use measures rather than strictly medical classifications (Leigh, 2009; Maxwell-McCaw & Zea, 2011). Self-identification allows participants to express their own understanding of their relationship to *Deafness*, language, and community membership, which is particularly relevant in studies examining language identity, language policy, and linguistic practices. In the present study, audiological measurements were not available. *Deafness* was therefore operationalized through a self-report instrument capturing four interrelated dimensions: self-

description of hearing status, functional hearing ability in spoken communication, primary language orientation, and degree of identification with the Deaf community.

These variables reflect both the communicative and sociocultural aspects of *Deafness*, providing a multidimensional framework for classifying participants. Taken together, these four variables enabled the construction of multidimensional participant profiles reflecting different orientations toward *Deafness*, language, and community affiliation. Rather than treating *Deafness* as a single biomedical variable, this approach captured the complex interplay between sensory experience, linguistic practice, and social identity. Such multidimensional operationalization is particularly appropriate for research examining language identity, language attitudes, and language policy in Deaf communities, as these phenomena are strongly influenced by participants' communicative practices and cultural affiliations.

Prior to participating in the qualitative semi-structured interview, each respondent completed a short self-report survey designed to gather baseline demographic data alongside measures of self-perception and identity orientation. Crucially, the survey also measured how respondents perceive themselves and position their identity along the Deaf-hearing continuum. Using standardized self-report scales, participants evaluated four core dimensions:

1. **Self-Described Hearing Status**: Subjective framing of personal hearing profile.
2. **Functional Communicative Preferences**: Preferred interaction modes across private and public domains.
3. **Primary Language Orientation**: Degree of reliance on SSL, spoken Serbian, lip-reading, or bimodal switching.
4. **Deaf Community Identification**: Self-perceived sense of cultural belonging, pride, and affiliation within the broader signing collective.

This intake survey provided a multidimensional profile for each respondent, ensuring that qualitative narrative analysis in Chapter 4 could be systematically cross-referenced against participants' exact demographic backgrounds and self-perceived identity markers.

3.2. Data Collection Methods and Sampling

3.2.1. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews – Deaf Cohort

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with members of the Serbian Deaf community. Semi-structured interviews are a core method in qualitative research, providing a balance between structure and flexibility that is ideal for exploring complex social issues like language identity and policy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to elicit rich, detailed data that reflects the participants' perspectives on SSL and its role in their lives (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This method is particularly effective in sociolinguistic research, where understanding the nuances of language use, identity, and policy requires deep engagement with the lived experiences of individuals (Holmes, 2013). Unlike structured interviews, which limit the depth of responses, semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to elaborate on their answers, providing the researcher with a deeper understanding of the issues at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

One significant advantage of semi-structured interviews is their ability to capture the subjective experiences of Deaf individuals regarding their use of SSL, allowing participants to elaborate on personal and collective aspects of language identity (Padden & Humphries, 2005). For example, in a study exploring American Sign Language (ASL), Padden and Humphries (2005) used semi-structured interviews to examine how Deaf individuals construct their cultural identity through ASL use. This method enabled participants to share deeply personal narratives about their sense of belonging to the Deaf community and the ways ASL shaped their interactions with the hearing world. A similar approach with SSL users uncovered how SSL influences identity formation and community cohesion within the Serbian Deaf community.

In the context of sign language policy, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences with language rights, access to education, and institutional recognition (De Meulder, 2017). For instance, De Meulder (2017) employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Deaf individuals in Flanders regarding the official recognition of Flemish Sign Language (VGT). Participants shared insights into how policy changes impacted their access to services, employment opportunities, and societal attitudes toward the Deaf community. Using a similar approach with SSL users revealed how language policies in Serbia influence their daily lives, from educational settings to public accessibility.

Another example comes from Napier and Leeson (2016), who used semi-structured interviews to investigate sign language interpreter experiences across different cultural contexts. Deaf participants shared nuanced perspectives about the quality of interpretation services and the social dynamics between interpreters and the Deaf community. Applying this method to SSL uncovered how Deaf individuals perceive and navigate interpretation services, shedding light on broader systemic and cultural influences.

In this study, semi-structured interviews provided an adaptable framework to explore topics ranging from personal narratives about SSL's role in shaping identity to systemic issues like policy implementation and societal attitudes (Padden & Humphries, 2005; De Meulder, 2017). By allowing

participants to share detailed accounts of their lived experiences, this approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of SSL's sociolinguistic and cultural significance.

To account for cognitive development, linguistic maturity, and communicative variation across the participant sample, the semi-structured interview protocols were systematically adapted based on the participants' age group (see Appendix A).

For child and adolescent participants, interview prompts were anchored in concrete, immediate lifeworld contexts, such as daily classroom experiences, peer interactions, family communication at home, and personal routines surrounding hearing technologies. Questions were formulated using simplified structural framing, visual/situational prompts, and interactive conversational checks to minimize communicative anxiety and foster authentic expression in SSL.

Conversely, interview protocols for adult respondents emphasized broader reflective, systemic, and socio-historical dimensions. Adults were prompted to provide critical accounts of long-term policy shifts under the Law on the Use of Sign Language, institutional barriers encountered across healthcare and civic spaces, family dependency dynamics, and changing cultural identities within the Deaf community over time.

3.2.1.1. Sampling Strategy and Participant Demographics

The study employed purposive sampling, a technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is particularly useful in qualitative research, where the goal is not to generalize findings to a larger population but to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of a particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this case, participants were selected based on factors such as their age, gender, educational background, geographical location, and level of involvement in the Deaf community. This approach ensured a diverse sample that reflects the range of experiences and perspectives within the SSL community (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Raičević Bajić et al., 2021).

While the study originally aimed to recruit 30 participants, the final sample consisted of 24 participants due to constraints regarding availability and community accessibility. However, this sample size was fully sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new distinct themes or sociolinguistic insights emerged during the final interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Baxter & Jack, 2008). This final sample size allowed for a thorough, rigorous exploration of the data while maintaining the contextual depth required for descriptive thematic analysis (Yin, 2018).

Deaf participants were recruited through collaboration with the School for the Deaf Stefan Dečanski in Belgrade. The researcher worked closely with the school administration and educators to identify potential participants and ensure that the recruitment process was culturally sensitive and inclusive

(Woll & Ladd, 2003; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). Recruitment materials clearly explained the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, and the rights of the participants, ensuring that they were fully informed before agreeing to take part.

3.2.1.2. Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted over a period of four months, between March and June 2026, allowing for sufficient time to engage with participants and gather detailed data. Each interview lasted no more than 30 minutes, providing ample time for participants to share their experiences and for the researcher to explore key themes in depth (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted entirely in person within a dedicated, comfortable educational environment at the School for the Deaf Stefan Dečanski in Belgrade. All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical principles, ensuring that participants' anonymity was guaranteed and formalized through agreements signed prior to the start of the interviews.

All interviews were conducted in SSL, the native language of the participants. This was a crucial aspect of the research design, as it ensured that participants could express themselves fully and authentically. The use of SSL not only facilitated accurate data collection but also respected the linguistic and cultural identity of the participants. A professional interpreter fluent in SSL was present during the interviews for their entire duration, providing continuous interpretation to guarantee that the data collection process was conducted seamlessly, safely, and with the utmost cross-modal integrity.

With participants' consent, the interviews were video-recorded to capture all elements of sign language communication. These recordings were essential for ensuring the accuracy of the data, particularly in a study focused on sign language. As the visual aspect of sign language communication was integral to the data, including facial expressions and movements, it was not possible to blur participants' faces in the recordings. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, with careful attention to the nuances of SSL. The researcher, with the help of interpreters, cross-checked the transcriptions against the recordings to ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' responses. The data were transcribed in Serbian and then translated into English for analysis, ensuring that the original meaning was preserved as closely as possible.

3.2.2. Quantitative Pilot Survey – Hearing Cohort

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the societal factors affecting SSL language policy, a pilot questionnaire study was conducted with members of the hearing population. This study aimed to collect data on hearing individuals' awareness, attitudes, and perceptions regarding SSL, the Deaf community, and the broader sociolinguistic issues addressed in this research.

The inclusion of a pilot questionnaire study is justified by the need to understand how the hearing population, as the majority linguistic group, influences both public and governmental attitudes towards SSL policy and the integration of Deaf individuals. Hearing individuals' perceptions of SSL and their awareness of its cultural significance can have profound effects on policy outcomes, and this data will provide crucial insight into the external factors shaping the SSL community's experiences.

A purposive sampling method was used to select hearing participants for the pilot study. Participants were chosen based on age, gender, education, and geographic diversity to ensure a broad representation of hearing perspectives on SSL. The target sample size for the pilot study was approximately 100 participants. This sample size was deemed sufficient to obtain preliminary data and to highlight significant trends in attitudes toward SSL among hearing individuals.

The questionnaire was designed to assess hearing individuals' knowledge of SSL, their attitudes towards Deaf individuals, and their perceptions of language policy in Serbia. It consisted of both closed and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative data and qualitative insights (see Appendix C). Data collection was conducted via online platforms, ensuring accessibility for participants from different regions of Serbia. The pilot study served as a preliminary exploration to refine the survey instrument for future larger-scale studies.

Ethical considerations for the pilot study were aligned with those outlined for the main study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity maintained to protect their identities. All data is securely stored and only accessible to the researcher.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Coding Process

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analyzing the qualitative data collected through the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It was particularly well-suited to this study because it allowed for the systematic examination of the complex and nuanced data that was collected from the participants.

The thematic analysis followed the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involved familiarization with the data, where the researcher immersed themselves by reading and re-reading the transcriptions. This process allowed for a deep understanding of the content, facilitating the identification of potential patterns and themes.

In the second stage, the researcher systematically generated initial codes (Saldaña, 2016). These codes served as labels for significant aspects of the data that were relevant to the research questions. The coding process was both data-driven, derived directly from the data, and theory-driven, guided by the theoretical framework.

The third stage, searching for themes, focused on organizing the initial codes into broader themes. These themes reflected meaningful patterns within the data that addressed the research questions. At this point, the researcher created a thematic map to illustrate the relationships among different codes, allowing for the identification of overarching patterns, relationships, and contrasts within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the fourth stage, reviewing themes, the researcher assessed and refined the identified themes to ensure they accurately represent the data. This involved examining the themes in relation to both the coded data extracts and the entire dataset. During this phase, some themes were merged, split, or discarded to ensure they were distinct and coherent (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Once the themes were reviewed, the fifth stage involved defining and naming them. The researcher articulated the core meaning of each theme and its relevance to the research questions. This process involved not just describing the themes, but also analyzing their underlying significance within the context of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were named in a way that succinctly captured their essence and makes them easily understandable.

The final stage involved producing the report that presents the findings. This report provided a detailed description of the themes, supported by quotes and examples from the data to illustrate how they manifested in the participants' narratives. The researcher interpreted the themes in relation to the broader theoretical framework, linking the findings to existing literature and the study's research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, the report aimed to tell a coherent and compelling story about the role of SSL in shaping language identity and the impact of language policy on the Serbian Deaf community.

The coding process is a crucial element of thematic analysis, involving the systematic identification of meaningful segments of data that are relevant to the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). In this study, coding was conducted using both inductive and deductive approaches.

Inductive coding allowed the researcher to let codes emerge naturally from the data, without being confined by pre-established categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the researcher delved into the data, patterns and concepts directly linked to participants' experiences with SSL surfaced. This method was particularly valuable for uncovering unique or unexpected insights that may not have been anticipated prior to the study.

Simultaneously, deductive coding was applied, guided by the study's theoretical framework. In this approach, the researcher used predefined codes based on key concepts from sociolinguistic theory, such as language identity, cultural cohesion, and the effects of language policy. Deductive coding ensured that the analysis remains focused on the study's objectives and theoretical foundation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To manage and systematically organize the qualitative dataset, Microsoft Excel was utilized strictly as a manual data management matrix. Fully aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic framework, which highlights the researcher's active, subjective role in data interpretation over positivist or automated coding, the software functioned solely as a visual organization system. Excel facilitated the manual indexing, sorting, and display of verbatim interview extracts alongside researcher-generated codes, allowing for clear cross-referencing and iterative theme development while preserving the organic, deeply qualitative nature of the analytical process.

3.3.2. Triangulation and Interpretation of Findings

To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the study employed triangulation, which involves using multiple data sources and methods to cross-check and verify the results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, triangulation was achieved by comparing the interview data with relevant policy documents and existing literature on SSL and Deaf communities. This approach helped to ensure that the findings were not solely dependent on a single data source or perspective but are corroborated by multiple lines of evidence. Triangulation also mitigates potential biases in the data analysis, leading to more robust and reliable conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The interpretation of the findings went beyond a simple description of the themes to explore their implications for the broader sociolinguistic context. The researcher analyzed how the identified themes relate to the study's research questions and theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2014). This interpretation involved linking the themes to existing literature on language policy, identity, and Deaf studies, highlighting how the findings contribute to or challenge current understandings in these fields (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretation also considered the practical implications of the findings, particularly in terms of informing language policy and educational practices in Serbia.

3.4. Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity

Ethical considerations were central to this research, particularly given its focus on a minority group that may be vulnerable (Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992). Special care was taken to address ethical concerns at every stage of the study to ensure the protection and respect of participants' rights and well-being. This included obtaining necessary ethical approvals, ensuring informed consent, maintaining

confidentiality and anonymity, and addressing the specific ethical challenges involved in working with the Deaf community (Harrington & Turner, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Before commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. The Committee reviewed the research proposal to ensure that it meets the ethical standards for conducting research with participants, particularly in terms of informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Informed consent was a fundamental ethical requirement for this study. All participants were fully informed about the nature of the research, the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. This information was provided in both written and verbal forms, with materials available in SSL to ensure that all participants fully understood what participation entailed.

Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. Given the nature of sign language communication, it was not possible to blur participants' faces in the video recordings, as facial expressions are an essential component of the data being collected. This aspect was clearly explained to participants during the consent process, ensuring they were fully aware and agreeable to the conditions of participation. All video recordings and transcriptions are securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Furthermore, interpreters involved in the study signed confidentiality agreements to safeguard the privacy of participants. By implementing these measures, the study ensured that participants' dignity and trust were respected throughout the research process.

Consent forms were signed by participants, and additional verbal consent was obtained before the start of each interview. For participants under the age of 18 or those with additional vulnerabilities, consent was also obtained from a parent or guardian.

Maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of participants was critical, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as identity and language use within a minority community. To protect participants' privacy, all personal identifiers were removed from the data during transcription. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and any identifying details were altered to prevent participants from being recognized in the final report or any publications resulting from the research.

All data, including interview recordings, transcripts, and consent forms, were securely stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the researcher. Physical documents were kept in a secure location.

Conducting research within the Deaf community presented a number of ethical challenges, particularly in relation to communication barriers and the need for cultural sensitivity (Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992; Singleton & Morgan, 2006). Researchers must understand that Deaf individuals form a

linguistic and cultural minority community rather than simply a group defined by disability (Padden & Humphries, 1988). This recognition had direct implications for study design and participant engagement, as it necessitated awareness of potential power differentials and respect for cultural norms (Lane et al., 1996). For instance, relying solely on spoken or written language could inadvertently exclude or alienate potential participants if adjustments were not made for SSL. Moreover, building on this foundational perspective, collaboration with Deaf community members early in the research process helped align the study's aims and methods with community values, thereby ensuring that the design was both respectful and methodologically sound (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, failing to address these ethical and communicative considerations could compromise the validity of the research and undermine trust between investigators and participants, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity at every stage of the research process (Harrington & Turner, 2001).

First, to ensure robust cultural sensitivity throughout the project, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflection and consultation with Deaf community members. This involvement took the form of advisory roles or participatory research partnerships, ensuring that community insights directly informed the study design, data collection, and analysis (Harrington & Turner, 2001; Lane, 1992). Special attention was paid to potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants, with efforts made to foster an environment in which participants felt comfortable, respected, and valued (Lane et al., 1996).

Moreover, to mitigate communication barriers, all communication materials, including consent forms and interview guides, were provided in SSL (Padden & Humphries, 1988). A professional interpreter was employed to facilitate communication during the interviews (Singleton & Morgan, 2006), and they received structured briefings on the ethical considerations of the study. These briefings covered protocols for confidentiality, impartiality, and cultural competency, reinforcing the importance of neutrality and respect in the interpreter's role (Harrington & Turner, 2001).

Additionally, informed consent in sign language was a critical aspect of this research (Lane, 1992). The informed consent process took place in SSL, with interpreters available to assist participants who required clarification (Singleton & Morgan, 2006). This approach ensured that participants fully understood the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and promoted equitable participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harrington & Turner, 2001).

Finally, the study paid particular attention to vulnerable participants, such as those with additional disabilities or those who may have experienced trauma related to their Deaf identity (Ladd, 2003).

By integrating these considerations into the overall research design and methodology, the project aimed not only to gather data but also to uphold the highest standards of care, respect, and cultural sensitivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.5. Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the academic rigor, trustworthiness, and robustness of this qualitative case study, it was subject to certain limitations that may affect the generalizability and interpretation of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One key limitation was the reliance on a relatively small sample size, which, while appropriate for qualitative research, might not capture the full diversity of experiences within the broader SSL community across the entire nation (Bryman, 2014). Additionally, the case study design, while providing in-depth insights into a specific context, limited the ability to generalize the findings to other Deaf communities or contexts beyond Serbia (Lane et al., 1996; Ladd, 2003).

The potential impact of these limitations on the results included the possibility that the findings may be more reflective of the specific experiences of the selected participants rather than the entire Serbian Deaf community. Furthermore, the use of interpreters in the interview process, while necessary for facilitating communication, introduced a layer of translation and interpretation that could affect the sub-textual nuance of the sign expressions.

To minimize the potential limitations of this study, several strategies were employed. One key approach involved ensuring a broad range of participant backgrounds. By intentionally seeking diversity in age, educational attainment, and geographic region across Serbia, the study captured a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives. This approach helped to strengthen the richness of the data and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

In addition to diverse sampling, the study incorporated triangulation as a means of enhancing the reliability of its findings. Drawing on data from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, and existing literature, allowed for a cross-referencing process that reduces bias. This method ensured that insights were validated through different lenses, reinforcing the credibility of the conclusions drawn.

A further consideration was the researcher's reflexivity. Throughout the research process, continuous reflection on the researcher's own positionality and assumptions was integral. By recognizing how personal experiences and interactions with participants might shape the study's outcomes, the researcher maintained a critical awareness of potential influences. Practices such as maintaining a research journal and engaging with feedback from peers and community members fostered transparency and contributed to the integrity of the research.

To ensure the academic rigor, trustworthiness, and robustness of this qualitative case study, the evaluation framework established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was systematically applied. In qualitative inquiry, traditional quantitative measures of internal/external validity and reliability are replaced by four primary criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, corresponding to internal validity, addresses the accuracy with which the study captures the true realities of the participants' lived experiences. In this study, credibility was established through three main strategies:

- **Data Source Triangulation**: The narratives obtained from the 24 semi-structured interviews were systematically cross-referenced and corroborated against legislative documents, social strategic documents (e.g., the 2030 Education Strategy), and existing sociolinguistic literature on sign language policies.
- **Persistent Engagement**: The researcher developed an active, long-term collaboration with local institutions, specifically the School for the Deaf Stefan Dečanski in Belgrade, which facilitated prolonged exposure to the cultural and educational interactive norms of the community (Woll & Ladd, 2003).
- **Continuous Interpreter Presence**: A professional interpreter fluent in SSL was present during the interviews for their entire duration, providing continuous interpretation. Transcripts were iteratively cross-checked against the raw video recordings by the researcher to verify exact linguistic equivalence and preserve subtle, non-manual sub-textual meanings.

Transferability, corresponding to external validity or generalizability, concerns the extent to which the qualitative findings can be applied or transferred to other social settings or communities. Because an intrinsic case study is inherently context-bound, direct statistical generalization was not the goal of this inquiry (Stake, 1995). Instead, transferability was achieved by providing a *thick description* of the precise sociolinguistic, institutional, and historical boundaries defining the Serbian Deaf community and the legal environment surrounding SSL. By explicitly reporting participant profiles, regional backgrounds, and communication barriers, this research offers a clear conceptual blueprint that future scholars can utilize to compare, evaluate, and adapt to other marginalized sign language communities globally (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Dependability corresponds to reliability and establishes whether the research findings are consistent, stable, and repeatable under similar conditions. To achieve high dependability, a transparent and comprehensive audit trail was meticulously documented throughout the project's life cycle. This audit trail details every operational decision made from the initial participant selection via purposive criteria down to the micro-level coding choices within the thematic analysis framework (Saldaña,

2016). Every shift in the research direction, such as modifying interview prompts based on intermediate findings, was structurally recorded in a reflexive research journal, ensuring that the entire analytical trajectory remains completely trackable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014).

3.6. Chapter Summary

The research methodology outlined in this chapter was designed to provide a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between language identity, language policy, and social dynamics within the SSL community. By employing a qualitative, exploratory, case study approach, this study successfully captured the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences, contributing valuable insights to the fields of sociolinguistics, language policy, and Deaf studies. Through careful consideration of ethical issues, limitations, and strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor, the methodology was structured to produce findings that are both meaningful and credible, offering a significant contribution to the academic and practical understanding of SSL and its role in the Serbian Deaf community.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter provides a detailed, critical sociolinguistic discussion and analysis of the empirical data generated during this study. The findings are examined in close conversation with the historical, political, and theoretical frameworks established in the preceding literature review, as well as the specific research questions and hypotheses outlined in the formal doctoral application. At its core, this project explores how the official, top-down legal recognition of SSL interacts with the bottom-up, lived experiences of linguistic identity, social empowerment, and educational access within the local Deaf community. By utilizing the qualitative, exploratory, intrinsic case study design described in the methodology chapter, this analysis uses Braun and Clarke's structured thematic framework to unpack twenty-four deeply contextualized, personal narratives from signing youth and young adults in Serbia.

The analytical approach used here goes beyond viewing language simply as a neutral tool for transmitting information. Instead, it approaches SSL as a primary site of social organization, identity negotiation, and resistance to systemic marginalization. To balance these qualitative personal accounts, the analysis incorporates descriptive institutional metrics from the baseline language and community belonging survey, as well as broader school infrastructure data. Merging these data sources makes it possible to evaluate the three foundational hypotheses that guide this project:

- **Hypothesis 1:** The formal integration of native sign language within specialized educational settings remains limited, creating a gap between top-down inclusive policy goals and everyday classroom interaction.
- **Hypothesis 2:** The statutory legal recognition of a minority sign language does not automatically translate into real-world civic empowerment or public accessibility unless supported by localized enforcement and community-led execution.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Language identity within the signing community is highly stratified and non-monolithic, shaped significantly by early childhood language exposure, family background, and shifting institutional environments.

4.1. Theme 1: The Spectrum of Deafhood—Cultural Pride vs. Instrumental Language Orientation

The empirical qualitative evidence generated across the twenty-four participant accounts reveals a highly complex, multi-layered sociolinguistic continuum within the Serbian signing population. This spectrum challenges the uniform, simplified assumptions often embedded in top-down state policy planning, demonstrating that linguistic minority identification is far from monolithic. Instead,

individual language orientations split into two fundamentally distinct paths based on early childhood exposure and socialization environments.

On one end of this continuum, native signers from Deaf families experience manual communication as a core cultural and linguistic right, a phenomenon that aligns with the concept of *Deafhood* described in the literature review. On the opposite end, Hard-of-Hearing individuals, late signers, assistive device wearers or those from exclusively hearing households frequently adopt a clinical-instrumental stance. In this thesis, I introduce the term *bimodal pragmatism* to describe this orientation: an approach in which individuals move between signed and spoken language according to communicative necessity and functional utility, treating sign language primarily as a communicative resource rather than as the principal basis of cultural or personal identity.

This deep sociolinguistic division directly supports the third core hypothesis outlined in the research proposal, which states that collective identity and language attachment are fundamentally determined by early childhood language exposure, family background, and immediate peer dynamics rather than basic biological categories.

4.1.1. Ontological Anchors of Deafhood: Generational Language Transmission and Identity Ownership

For participants who grew up within multi-generational Deaf families, SSL is experienced as a natural first language and a profound source of collective pride. Rather than viewing *Deafness* through a medical lens as a physical deficit, these individuals reclaim manual communication as a positive, self-contained cultural identity. This process of constructing an empowering, self-affirming identity stands in sharp contrast to the medical deficit model used by mainstream state institutions. For example, Anne, who grew up surrounded by a signing family structure, notes:

> That is natural for me, my language. I love it. I am proud that I am Deaf. I can communicate with those who speak too. When they speak a little faster, I can't understand them, but I have no problem telling them, 'Please slow down a little.' [1]

This narrative illustrates that native sign language serves as a vital tool for personal and social autonomy. By framing SSL as natural and primary, the participant shifts the social burden of adaptation back onto the hearing majority, confidently demanding a slower conversational pace rather than internalizing a sense of communicative failure. This structural pride and reclamation of bodily

[1] Original (Serbian): „То је за мене природан, мој језик. Волим. Ја сам поносна што сам Глува. Могу да комуницирам и са овима који причају.Када мало брже причају, не могу да их разумем, али немам проблем да им кажем мало успорите, молим вас."

autonomy appear even more clearly in Devon's testimony from an exclusively signing household, who frames manual communication as an explicit birthright and strongly rejects any label of disability:

> My right, which I have from birth, is to use my hands. A Deaf person should not be forced to speak because it is naturally given to them to use their hands. They look at us as if we are disabled, but we are actually not disabled. We can work, we can enroll in university. Hearing people think we are disabled only because we do not speak but instead use sign language. All of that is a matter of upbringing.[2]

This statement stands as a powerful rejection of the medical pathology framework that dominates public policy. By connecting the physical use of the hands to baseline structural capabilities, such as completing a university degree or securing a professional career, the participant highlights a deep desire for structural equality. This sense of identity ownership is echoed across multiple transcripts from multi-generational signing homes. Jason notes, "I mean, that's my pride. I'm actually very proud of it. It's my language, and I'm proud of it,"[3] while Alex asserts, "There is no shame. I am proud. I adore my hands."[4] These testimonies confirm that when language transmission occurs naturally within the home, it builds a solid foundation of group solidarity and self-worth that resists dominant audist assumptions.

4.1.2. Repertoires of Plurilingualism: Regional Dialects and International Sign Fluidity

The depth of this linguistic identification is further illustrated by the rich, fluid language repertoires developed by fluent signers, who frequently expand their communication styles beyond national boundaries. The qualitative text reveals that native users do not view sign language as an isolated or limited system; instead, they engage with visual communication as an open, global network. This spatial and digital flexibility is particularly prominent among the younger generation, who use social media platforms to connect with international sign systems. For instance, Anne describes how her language practices evolved through online spaces:

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[2] Original (Serbian): „Моје право које ја имам рођењем је да користим руке. Не треба Глуву особу форсирати да прича јер јој је природно дато да користи руке. Они на нас гледају као на инвалиде а ми заправо нисмо инвалиди. Ми можемо и да радимо, можемо факултет да упишемо. Чујући мисле да смо ми инвалиди само што не причамо него користимо знаковни. Све је то ствар васпитања."

[3] Original (Serbian): „Мислим, то је мој понос. Ја сам заправо баш поносан на то. То је мој језик и поносан сам на то."

[4] Original (Serbian): „Нема срамоте. Поносан сам. Ја обожавам своје руке."

> You know that there are different sign languages. Serbian is not the only one I know. I also know International Sign, Russian Sign Language, Italian Sign Language, American Sign Language, and German Sign Language. That's all. I saw them on Instagram, on live streams, by myself. It was there on Instagram that I first saw that there was a sign language that wasn't the same as ours. Then it became interesting to me. If there's something I don't understand, I ask my dad when it's about International Sign, because he knows it too. Then my dad explains it to me, and over time I learn more easily on my own and understand it.[5]

This narrative exposes an advanced level of plurilingual sign competence that remains invisible to standard top-down educational policies. It demonstrates that the family structure acts as an active site for codification and cross-cultural learning, where international visual elements are shared across generations. This global awareness is matched by a keen understanding of localized regional dialects within Serbia itself, as participants must routinely navigate geographic variations when entering institutional environments. Ace highlights the initial linguistic friction experienced when moving between regional centers:

> There is a small difference. For example, when I lived in Novi Sad, I really got used to the sign language from Novi Sad, and I thought that was the only one in Serbia. Then I came here and encountered the sign language from Belgrade. It was quite different, but now I've gotten used to it, and now I also know Bosnian Sign Language. Because of Devon and Nick. So, it's a great experience because you learn more different sign languages.[6]

Furthermore, this multi-layered signing landscape includes ethnic minority sign language variations within multicultural regions. Tara notes the unique position of a peer from a Hungarian-speaking household: "There is Matteo. He is the only one who uses different signs compared to us. His mom

[5] Original (Serbian): „Знаш да постоје различити знаковни језици. Ја не знам само српски. Знам и интернационални знаковани, руски знаковни, италијански знаковни, амерички знаковни, немачки знаковни. То је све. Сама, на Инстаграму, на лајву сам видела. Ту на Инстаграму сам први пут видела да постоји неки знаковни језик који није исти као наш. И онда ми је то било занимљиво. Ако нешто не разумем, питам тату кад је у питању интернационални знаковни, пошто и он зна, онда ми тата објасни и после временом сама лакше учим и капирам."
[6] Original (Serbian): „Постоји мала разлика. На пример, када сам живео у Новом Саду баш сам навикао на знаковни језик из Новог Сада и мислио сам да је то једини у Србији. Онда сам дошао овде, сусрео сам се са знаковним из Београда. Доста се разликовао, сад сам се већ навикао, а сад већ знам и босански знаковни језик због Девона и Ника. Тако да је супер искуство јер учич више различитих знаковних језика."

and dad are Hungarian."[7] These structural insights reveal that the contemporary SSL community is a dynamic space of language contact, where regional dialects, national variants, and global digital sign practices constantly intersect and enrich the cultural fabric.

4.1.3. Instrumental Tool Pragmatism and the Pressure of Bimodal Detachment

On the opposite end of the sociolinguistic spectrum, a distinct subgroup of participants views SSL through an entirely practical, non-identity lens. For these individuals, who are frequently late signers, Hard-of-Hearing, assistive device wearers or those from exclusively hearing households, the language is not an ontological anchor of cultural identity, but a functional tool used to pass information when spoken communication hits a wall.

This pragmatic detachment is directly driven by the physical presence and psychological weight of assistive amplification technology. For the 13 participants using standard hearing aids and the 3 recipients of cochlear implants, the primary language acquisition environment was defined by intense parental and medical pressure to achieve oral compliance. When a child is continuously tracked through clinical speech exercises, they internalize an understanding of communication that is entirely functional and speech-centric. Consequently, when these device-reliant youth enter specialized signing environments, they do not automatically experience SSL as a natural marker of cultural pride. Instead, they frame sign language as a secondary, fallback mechanism and an emergency backup tool to patch over moments when their physical technology hits a wall, such as when acoustic noise becomes overwhelming or device batteries fail. SSL is stripped of its status as an ontological heritage language and reduced to a functional strategy, demonstrating how deeply medical-clinical interventions reshape the linguistic loyalties of minoritized youth.

This orientation can be also placed under the term *bimodal pragmatism*, where individuals move between signing and speech depending on physical necessity rather than cultural loyalty. For instance, when asked whether sign language represents an identity marker or something deeper than a tool, Dylan, from a hearing family, responds plainly: "It's means of communication. I feel equally connected, I would say, to both Deaf and hearing people. Nothing special really."[8]

Miles, who learned to sign later in his teenage years under the influence of a Hard-of-Hearing parent who favored speech, expresses a very similar practical detachment: "It is not more than a language.

[7] Original (Serbian): „Има један Матео. Он једини користи различите знакове у односу на нас. Мама и тата су му Мађари."
[8] Original (Serbian): „Средство за комуникацију. Подједнако сам, да кажем, повезан и са Глувима и са чујућима. Ништа сад специјално."

It is just communication, the same as when I speak... My mom always insisted that I speak, and with my dad it doesn't matter, I can use sign language, I can also speak."[9]

This reveals a deep layer of home-language dissonance, where young people are torn between the oral expectations of hearing parents and the visual realities of their peer groups. For these students, SSL is used strategically to build temporary connections within the school environment rather than to step into a lifelong cultural community. This structural distance is clear in the account of Victor, a Hard-of-Hearing student who maintains an exclusively spoken relationship with his immediate family:

> I use sign language a little. But I can't communicate like that with my family. I want to speak and talk more. I was at exercises with a surdologist and a speech therapist. I practiced speaking. I actually use sign language to help those who do not speak like Lucy, Devon and Jason. Otherwise, I don't belong to either Deaf community, only here at school.[10]

These accounts challenge the assumption that all people with hearing loss experience minority language identity in the same way. Instead, they highlight a complex community landscape where functional speech capabilities, family pressures, and clinical rehabilitation paths constantly reshape personal alignment with the signing collective.

4.1.4. Internal Community Friction: Identity Contestation and Technological Divides

To understand the internal sociolinguistic boundaries within the contemporary youth cohort, we must analyze the bio-technical stratification created by the uneven presence of assistive communication devices. The participant dataset shows three distinct technological configurations: a non-device user group ($N = 8$) who rely entirely on visual sign lanes, a standard hearing aid group ($N = 13$) managing bimodal adaptations, and a cochlear implant group ($N = 3$) representing the sharpest edge of state-sponsored medical intervention. This technological divide influences how participants experience the signing collective. Non-device users routinely view their manual communication as an uncompromised cultural asset, whereas hearing aid and cochlear implant users frequently face continuous, device-mediated vulnerabilities. These bio-technical splits generate distinct language

[9] Original (Serbian): „Није више од језика. Исто као комуникација, исто је као кад причам. Мама је увек инсистирала да говорим, а са татом је свеједно, могу и знаковни језик, могу и да причам."

[10] Original (Serbian): „Ја мало користим знаковни. Ја са својом породицом не могу тако да комуницирам. Желим више да причам и говорим. Био сам на вежбама код сурдолога и логопеда. Вежбао сам да причам. Ја заправо користим знаковни како бих помогао овима што не причају као што су Лара, Давид и Јован. Иначе не идем ни у једну ни у другу заједницу Глувих, само овде у школи."

loyalty pressures, where the physical presence of a device becomes a visible symbol of an individual's alignment with either the hearing medical framework or the visual *Deafhood* collective.

This deep sociolinguistic stratification does not only exist as an abstract continuum. It manifests as real communicative friction, isolation, and peer boundary contestation within the daily lives. The qualitative narratives reveal that the division between fluent signers and speech-reliant individuals often creates internal community boundaries and conversational gaps. Fluent signers frequently express clear frustration with the linguistic compromises required to communicate with peers who rely primarily on speech, oral tracks, or assistive devices. As Miles notes, navigating these cross-modal interactions within a diverse student body can lead to a defensive withdrawal and a reduction in conversational engagement: "Deaf people are like that, they are sensitive, very sensitive. What can we do about it? Not talk."[11]

Furthermore, the mechanical management of technology introduces additional barriers to fluid communication. Participants describe how their conversational access can suddenly disappear due to equipment failures. Tyler captures this daily instability during an interview: "I don't have the device, otherwise I hear better. There's no battery at the moment. But they have to speak slowly. When they speak quickly I don't understand anything."[12] Similarly, Vincent highlights how safety concerns during physical activities force them to disconnect from technology entirely, changing how they interact with their environment: "I don't wear the device during physical education so I don't accidentally break it."[13] These accounts demonstrate that the physical and social management of hearing aids and speech implants creates a constantly shifting landscape of accessibility, shaping how individuals move between signed and spoken spaces throughout the school day.

4.1.5. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis

This internal division is strongly supported by the data from the baseline language and community belonging survey, which maps these qualitative divides across the broader sample. Cross-referencing the personal narratives with the survey spreadsheet shows that participants who first learned SSL during early childhood (0–5 years), such as those from multi-generational signing homes, consistently report their level of identification with the Deaf community as "To a great extent" or "To a very large extent." Conversely, participants who picked up the language later in childhood or adolescence (6–

[11] Original (Serbian): „Глуви су такви, они су осетљиви, много су осетљиви. Шта можемо да урадимо по том питању? Да не причамо."
[12] Original (Serbian): „Немам апарат иначе боље чујем. Немам батерије тренутно. Али морају полако да причају. Кад брзо причају ништа не разумем."
[13] Original (Serbian): „Ја не носим апарат када је физичко. Да не поломим случајно."

12 or 13–18 years), or who are registered as Hard-of-Hearing or wear assistive devices, select more detached answers like “Somewhat,” “A little,” or even “I don’t identify at all.”

Crucially, a deeper analysis of the quantitative survey forms reveals an extraordinary sociolinguistic anomaly that exposes the depth of this internalized medical framing. When filling out the demographic background section, multiple Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing children who are physically enrolled in the specialized school and wear hearing aids or cochlear implants checked the box self-identifying their status as “Hearing.” This striking response pattern represents a profound identity disassociation driven by language policy and clinical tracking. Because the state’s aggressive medical-mainstreaming discourse tells these youth that their sensory devices have auditorily “fixed” their physical pathology, the children internalize a bimodal re-alignment. They separate themselves from the “Deaf” category on paper, treating deafness as a negative medical state that they have successfully escaped through technology. This survey response anomaly proves that assistive devices do not simply amplify sound; they operate as powerful biopolitical tools that fragment collective identity, causing minoritized youth to disassociate from their own linguistic community and declare themselves “Hearing” even while navigating a specialized signing classroom.

Evaluating these highly stratified identity markers required a critical reassessment of my own preconceptions regarding linguistic minority groups. Entering the field, my initial expectation was that a shared visual modality would naturally produce a cohesive, uniform community structure unified by a singular language loyalty. However, analyzing the contrast between the fluid, expansive communication of native signers and the more constrained, hesitant sign choices of late signers from hearing households challenged this simplified view.

Tracking these micro-interactions within the school environment revealed how heavily macro-sociolinguistic pressures, specifically the dominant societal demand for oral compliance, are physicalized by the youth. Documenting the sudden conversational shifts or linguistic hesitation that occurred when institutional authorities appeared forced me to look past the rigid, binary classifications found in standard state policy reports.

Instead, it became empirically clear that language identity within this space operates as a highly fluid spectrum. This orientation is fundamentally shaped by whether a child’s natural visual communication was supported and embraced within the primary family unit or managed as a secondary administrative accommodation.

This internal continuum is further explained when cross-referenced with the linguistic literacy scores extracted from the hearing majority dataset. The quantitative data reveals a complete lack of public exposure that forces the signing community into a defensive space: a striking 63% of hearing

respondents are completely unaware that SSL is officially recognized by law as a legitimate language in Serbia. This legal isolation is compounded by a severe deficit in public communicative capacity. When asked to rate their personal knowledge of sign language, 51% of hearing individuals report having absolutely zero knowledge ("1" on a 5-point scale), and an additional 31% report a minimal score of "2." This means that 82% of the hearing public possesses effectively no functional awareness of SSL structure. This literacy vacuum is directly maintained by institutional gaps: 80% of the hearing population state that they have never had a single opportunity to learn or be exposed to SSL in their lives. Consequently, the fluid spectrum of *Deafhood* documented among signing youth is not a passive configuration; it is actively maintained as a protective cultural boundary against an outside hearing society that remains linguistically illiterate and largely unaware of the language's legal existence.

4.2. Theme 2: Systemic Policy Inertia—The Chasm Between *De Jure* Legislation and *De Facto* Public Space Accessibility

This theme examines the core research question regarding the real-world social empowerment and civic visibility of the Serbian Deaf community following the passage of the Law on the Use of Sign Language. Top-down statutory planning often treats the passing of a law as an automatic, comprehensive solution for language equality. However, the detailed accounts provided by the participants expose a deep divide between official legal text and the daily barriers encountered across civic, medical, commercial, and media infrastructures.

This implementation gap directly confirms the second foundational hypothesis outlined in the formal research framework, which states that statutory legal validation fails to produce automatic social empowerment unless it is accompanied by enforceable public sector standards, structural accountability, and community-led execution. Rather than moving through public spaces with confidence, participants describe an ongoing struggle against institutional inertia, where the legal rights granted on paper disappear the moment they approach a public service desk.

4.2.1. The Statutory Mirage: *De Jure* Rights and the Reality of Bureaucratic Exclusion

When attempting to navigate standard public administrative spaces, such as municipal offices, banks, post offices, or police stations, participants routinely encounter public sector employees who are completely untrained in SSL and unwilling to adapt. This lack of training reduces legal rights to a purely symbolic gesture, shifting the entire structural burden of communication directly onto the young signing minority. Participants describe these daily bureaucratic interactions not as spaces of civil access, but as sites of exhausting adaptation and minor systematic humiliations. For example, Devon provides a vivid account of this structural barrier when trying to complete basic financial transactions:

> It is accepted by law, but do people actually respect it, or apply it? Well, not really. I don't feel like it is actually accepted as equal. It's pointless when the woman at the counter doesn't know sign language. And then I have to, of course, use pantomime, write on paper. That is really exhausting for me. Simply, Deaf people have to adapt more, to respect hearing people, but I think hearing people should also respect us a little. Why do we always have to learn to speak, while they have hands and they can also learn sign language?[14]

This testimony highlights a profound ideological mismatch within the state's language planning framework. While the law technically grants the right to use sign language, the lack of operational execution forces the individual to drop their native tongue and rely on fallback strategies like writing on paper or basic pantomime. This dynamic exposes what critical language policy theorists describe as a top-down failure, where state institutions pass symbolic legislation to project an image of inclusivity while leaving the underlying structures of public interaction entirely unchanged.

This systematic failure at the frontline counter is further illustrated by symbolic gestures of inclusion that completely collapse in practice. When attempting to utilize public infrastructures specifically advertised as accessible, participants find that the physical markers of accommodation mask an absolute vacuum of communicative capacity. Kelly highlights this frustrating contradiction during a routine visit to the post office:

> There was a notice stating that there was a window designated for the Deaf, and I attempted to use it, but there was absolutely no assistance available. In the end, I had to manage on my own. I was forced to fall back on writing on paper.[15]

This narrative exposes the performative nature of local status planning. The presence of an official public notice promising a "Deaf window" allows the state institution to claim visual compliance with anti-discrimination mandates on paper. Yet, the failure to train frontline staff or provide on-site linguistic validation turns the physical desk into a space of heightened marginalization. Rather than

[14] Original (Serbian): „Јесте законом то прихваћено, али да ли људи то стварно поштују, односно примењују? Па и не баш. Немам осећај као да је то заправо прихваћено као једнак. Џаба када жена на шалтеру не зна знаковни језик. И онда ја морам, наравно, пантомиме, на папиру да пишем. То ми је стварно малтретирање. Просто, Глуви морају више да се прилагођавају, да поштују чујуће, а сматрам да би требало и чујући мало нас да поштују. Зашто ми увек морамо да учимо да говорим, а они имају руке, могу и они да уче знаковни језик?"

[15] Original (Serbian): „Било је обавештење да има шалтер за Глуве и покушала сам то да искористим али није било помоћи и на крају сам морала сама да се снађем. Ја сам морала на крају да пишем."

receiving an institutional accommodation, the minoritized language user is forced to experience a public breakdown of their legal rights, ultimately externalizing the labor of communication back onto their own fallback literacy strategies.

4.2.2. Institutional Trauma in Medical and Public Welfare Spaces

The consequences of this policy-practice gap become incredibly dangerous when participants enter healthcare environments, where a lack of fluent communication can directly jeopardize patient safety, accurate diagnostics, and medical consent. The qualitative evidence indicates that routine medical visits frequently degrade into highly stressful, isolating, and traumatic events due to the total absence of professional interpreters or signing staff within Serbian medical centers. For instance, Lucy recalls a routine dental visit that quickly turned into a communicative crisis:

> However, that seemingly simple visit to the dentist turned into hell. She keeps talking, I don't understand anything. I ask her to speak slowly, but she won't. In the end she gave me paper and we communicated by writing. Also, for example, when I go to the store it is always a slightly more difficult situation because it's not just that she tells me the price and I quickly calculate what I give her. Instead, I always have to look at the cash register to see the amount or ask for the receipt and then calculate how much I should pay. An unnecessarily long process, and for example if the cashier knew sign language it would be quick and done.[16]

Framing an ordinary healthcare appointment as a "hell" highlights the deep psychological strain caused by institutional exclusion. When a medical professional refuses to slow down their speech or make basic adjustments, it strips the young patient of their agency, leaving them vulnerable and dependent on written notes just to understand their own treatment.

This structural exclusion embedded within public health spaces is deeply worsened by a routine habit that can be conceptualized as *the clinical typist turn*. While top-down policy text promises equal access, data from adult signers exposes how the physical movements of medical practitioners can directly trigger severe health crises. When a physician turns away from a Deaf patient to log data into a computer terminal while continuing to speak, all visual communication tracks, including lip-reading

[16] Original (Serbian)**:** „Међутим тај наизглед једноставан одлазак код зубара претворио се у пакао. Прича прича, ја ништа не разумем. Па замолим полако па неће. На крају ми је дала папир и преко папира смо се дописивале. Плус, на пример, када идем у продавницу увек то мора да буде за нијансу тежа ситуација зато што није само она мени каже колико ја њој да дам и ја брзо израчунам све. Него увек морам да гледам на каси која је цифра у питању или да тражим рачун па онда да ја то израчунам колико ћу да дам... Беспотребно дуг процес, а на пример, кад би продавачица знала знаковни било би све кратко готово."

and facial expressions, are instantly severed. Vance details the dangerous, life-threatening consequences of this systematic lack of communicative awareness during an inpatient checkup:

> Going to the doctor, hospital. He says something, something about medication. I was reading lips and he turns away again. Maybe right at that moment when he turns away, he says something important, and I can't read lips. There is no understanding. I go home, I take the medicine at the wrong time because I didn't understand properly, and I got a high temperature because of that. In all those important state institutions, at least one interpreter should exist. It simply should. It is dangerous for us. God forbid someone dies because of that.[17]

Malik reinforces this pattern of clinical marginalization, noting that when practitioners refuse to alter their spoken delivery to accommodate the participant's expressive voice, communication collapses into an unstandardized reliance on ad-hoc personal technologies:

> The doctor didn't understand at all because of the way I speak... and then he started writing, and I take my phone and write what I want, then I show it to him.[18]

When viewed together, these accounts demonstrate that *the clinical typist turn* is not a benign technological workflow, but a form of structural violence embedded within public healthcare environments. By turning away to engage with a computer terminal while continuing to speak, the physician treats the Deaf patient as a passive, audiological object rather than an active, informed participant in their own diagnostic track. The resulting communication breakdowns shift the entire operational burden of survival onto the individual's sensory endurance, transforming a routine medical encounter into a site of profound biological risk and physical trauma.

This pattern of medical marginalization is reinforced by Devon, who shares a critical event where he was left entirely isolated during an emergency hospital procedure while his family was away:

> How I communicated with the doctor – a disaster. The doctor comes and starts talking, and I was young and had no strength, and I still had to try, to explain through pantomime, to write…

[17] Original (Serbian): „Одлазак код доктора, болница. Он нешто каже, нешто у вези са лековима. Ја сам читао са усана а он опет окреће. Можда баш у том тренутку кад се окрене, каже нешто важно, а ја не могу да прочитам са усана. Немају разумевања. Ја одем кући, попијем лек у погрешно време, јер нисам добро разумео и добио сам високу температуру због тога. У свим тим државним установама које су важне, бар један од тумача треба да постоји. Просто мора. Опасно је за нас. Не дај Боже да умре неко због тога."

[18] Original (Serbian): „Доктор уопште није разумео због тога како ја причам и онда је кренуо да пише и ја узмем телефон и напишем шта хоћу па му покажем."

> They brought some educator from the dorm, since I was in the dorm, but it was a disaster. I didn't understand anything. I was becoming more and more nervous, I was angry. I called another educator; she found a professional interpreter. Then it was much easier. I explain with my hands, she translates, and only then did I get the most basic satisfaction of my needs. But still, imagine if I had been without the educator, without the interpreter, without my mom, without my dad. I am lying there. How could I communicate with the doctor? Impossible. And the hospital is very important. I remembered that situation and next time we sued the doctor. Probably the parents filed a lawsuit for discrimination against the Deaf.[19]

This critical narrative illustrates that the Law on the Use of Sign Language often only carries weight after a formal conflict occurs, rather than being used to systematically construct an accessible public healthcare system. The participant's emotional breakdown, characterized by growing panic and anger, is a direct result of being denied a professional interpreter during a time of physical vulnerability. It was only through the persistent intervention of a professional translator that his basic human needs were met. This text highlights that without immediate access to real-time interpretation, the Deaf community remains locked out of the most critical institutions of civic life, relying on external interventions to protect their basic safety.

4.2.3. The Digital Relay Illusion: Power Dynamics and Protocol Fractures in the SOS Center

To address these communication barriers, state-level initiatives introduced the SOS Video Relay Center, allowing participants to connect with remote interpreters via video calls on their phones. While the qualitative data shows that young people value this tool as a helpful short-term bridge, they also emphasize that its real-world utility is heavily limited by unpredictable service quality and serious breaches of translation protocols. Because these remote translators lack uniform professional standards, the video relay service becomes an unstable link that can compromise the user's privacy

[19] Original (Serbian): „Како сам комуницирао са доктором – катастрофа. Доктор дође и крене да прича, а ја мали и немам снаге, и још треба да се трудим, да објашњавам пантомимом, да пишем… Довели су неку васпитачицу из дома, пошто сам горе у дому, али катастрофа. Ништа нисам разумео. Постајао сам све нервознији, беснео сам. Звао сам другу васпитачицу, она је нашла професионалног тумача. Онда ми је било много лакше. Ја објасним рукама, она преведе, и тек тада сам добио најосновније задовољење потреба. Али опет, замисли да сам био без васпитачице, без тумача, без маме, без тате. Ја ту лежим. Како бих могао да комуницирам са доктором? Никако. А болница је јако важна. Ту ситуацију сам запамтио и следећи пут смо тужили доктора. Вероватно су родитељи поднели тужбу за дискриминацију Глувих."

and social agency. Devon details a serious breach of confidentiality and professional boundaries during a live dispute with a physician:

> Half of the interpreters are great, and half are a disaster. I'm at the doctor's; I take my phone and call SOS. The doctor and I are kind of arguing. I say I got really angry and said the doctor is stupid. And she took that and translated it. And I already said: 'Don't translate that' and she still translates it anyway. And then the doctor looks at me, and I am there with him in the room. Different story. The same situation. I need an interpreter. I explain, I explain what we are going to do now, how, where, what… And she translates all of that to me. And I just say to wait a bit, at a kiosk or something like that. And she sees that I turned away and just shuts off. Disappears. It happens that an interpreter is rude, that they don't respect a Deaf person, that they behave badly.[20]

This testimony reveals a complex, uneven power dynamic between the remote interpreter and the Deaf user. In standard translation practice, an interpreter should function as a secure, respectful channel for the user's voice. By ignoring a direct instruction or abruptly hanging up mid-conversation, the relay worker abuses their linguistic position, leaving the user completely exposed in an already tense environment. This systemic instability proves that top-down digital solutions remain fragile unless they are backed by strict professional accountability, ongoing monitoring, and open channels for community feedback.

4.2.4. Media Erasure, Symbolic Inclusion, and the Critique of Authentic Representation

Beyond immediate public infrastructures, this policy-practice gap shapes how the signing community experiences national broadcast media and public information networks. When official state broadcasts omit professional sign language inserts, they effectively cut off the Deaf population from vital national news and emergency updates. This leaves the community in a state of informational isolation, a barrier that participants describe with clear frustration. As Jason points out:

[20] Original (Serbian): „Половина тумача је супер, а половина катастрофа... Ја сам код доктора, узмем телефон и зовем СОС. Доктор и ја се нешто свађамо. Ја кажем, баш сам се изнервирао и рекао сам да је доктор глуп. И она је то узела и превела. А ја сам већ рекао: „Немој то да преводиш." и она ипак преведе. И онда ме доктор гледа, а ја сам ту с њим у просторији. Друга прича. Иста ситуација. Треба ми тумач. Ја објашњавам, објашњавам шта ћемо сад да радимо, како, где, шта… И она мени све то преведе. И ја само кажем да сачека мало, на трафици или тако нешто. И она види да сам се ја окренуо и само се угаси. Нестане. Дешава се да је тумач безобразан, да не поштује Глуву особу, да се ружно понаша."

> Whenever I watch TV and hearing people are just talking, I don't understand anything, that TV and the news mean nothing to me. When we have that little interpreter down there, it helps a lot, so I get all the information about what is happening in the world. And when there is no interpreter, it's like my TV is turned off.[21]

The metaphor of a television set being completely "turned off" underscores how mainstream media spaces push the signing community to the margins of public life. This informational exclusion is further complicated by a strong critique of how sign language and Deaf characters are presented when they actually do appear on screen. The younger generation, with their sharp eye for media literacy, identifies mainstream media representation as an artificial performance that prioritizes hearing actors over authentic community inclusion. Devon shares his frustration upon discovering this media tokenism online:

> Moreover, when I see on TV, in a series or a film… are those really Deaf people? No way. Hearing people are acting as Deaf people. Very, very rarely are they actually Deaf people who use sign language. It once happened that I was watching a film and saw some signs. I was really excited; I was very happy. And then I found that person on Instagram, because I thought they were Deaf. So, I thought, let me follow a Deaf actor. And then I see, he talks. I don't hear, I don't know what he is saying, but I see that he speaks and I know he can hear. That it is actually fake, that everything is an illusion.[22]

This discovery of an "illusion" exposes a deep dissatisfaction with superficial representation. For youth searching for true role models, watching a hearing actor mimic signs feels like a hollow public relations exercise that ignores the real depth of Deaf culture. Nick supports this view, noting that signed roles are almost always minor and tokenistic, failing to connect with the lived realities of the community:

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[21] Original (Serbian): „Увек кад гледам ТВ кад чујући само причају ја то ништа не разумем, ништа ми не значи тај телевизор и те вести. Када имамо ту оног малог тумача ту доле то много помаже, тако добијем све информације шта се дешава у свету. А када нема тумача, као да ми је ТВ угашен."

[22] Original (Serbian): „Штавише кад видим на ТВ, у серији или филму... да ли су то стварно Глуве особе? Ма какви. То чујући глуме Глуве особе. Јако, јако ретко су то стварно Глуве особе које говоре знаковни језик. Једном се десило да сам гледао неки филм и видео неке знакове. Стварно сам се узбудио, баш ми је било драго. И онда сам на Инстаграму нашао ту особу, јер сам мислио да је Глува. Па као, хајде да запратим неког Глувог глумца. И онда видим да он прича. Ја не чујем, не знам о чему прича, али видим да говори и знам да чује. Да је заправо лажно, да је све варка."

> Even when someone appears who uses sign language, it is usually briefly, like some minor role. I think that Deaf people understand it, that it is well presented to them, while hearing people may not understand what it is about, because it is actually about Deaf culture.[23]

These narratives show that youth reject shallow attempts at media inclusion, demanding instead authentic representation that honors their unique language, narrative autonomy, and heritage.

4.2.5. Structural Unemployment and the Limitations of Short-Term Accommodation

This top-down policy failure directly impacts the long-term career opportunities and economic stability of the youth. The qualitative testimonies reveal that even when a student overcomes educational barriers and earns an advanced university degree, the mainstream labor market routinely rejects them due to persistent audist biases and a total lack of workplace accommodation. Short-term tools like the SOS center cannot dismantle these deep structural barriers to employment. Devon documents a case of severe underemployment within his immediate peer circle:

> For example, I can't get a job in the police. I can't be a police officer. I can't. Will SOS help me? No, it won't. Not at all. It definitely makes communication easier and I'm glad it exists, of course. But are things really better for us now, are the rights equal. No, no. There is one Deaf person. He enrolled in university, really studied, finished university, got a diploma, and in the end got a job in a shop. I ask why? He simply runs into barriers. They don't want to hire him because he is Deaf. I say: but I can work, I can write, I have hands, I have legs, I can see. And as soon as they hear that someone is Deaf, they immediately reject them. They won't even consider them. That is a big problem.[24]

This account exposes a systemic waste of talent and potential within the community. Mainstream employers often view a non-speaking applicant as an operational risk, completely overlooking their qualifications, skills, and intellectual capabilities. By pointing out that a university diploma still leads

[23] Original (Serbian): „Чак и када се појави неко ко користи знаковни, то буде обично на кратко, као нека споредна улога. Сматрам да они који су Глуви, да су они схватили, да је њима добро представљена, а ови који чују можда да не схватају о чему се ради зато што се заправо ради о култури Глувих."

[24] Original (Serbian): „На пример, ја не могу да се запослим у полицији. Ја не могу да будем полицајац. Не могу. Хоће ли ми СОС помоћи? Ма неће. Шипак. Дефинитивно олакшава комуникацију и драго ми је што постоји, наравно. Али да је нама сада стварно боље, да су једнака права. Не, не. Има један Глув. Уписао је факултет, стварно је учио, завршио факултет, добио диплому и на крају се запослио у продавници. Ја питам зашто? Просто наилази на баријере. Неће да га запосле зато што је Глув. Ја кажем: па могу да радим, могу да пишем, имам руке, имам ноге, видим. А чим чују да је неко Глув, одмах га одбију. Неће ни да га узму у обзир. Е, то је велики проблем."

to basic retail underemployment, the participant shows that top-down language laws remain ineffective unless they are backed by strict anti-discrimination enforcement, career support programs, and structural mandates for workplace accessibility.

4.2.6. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis

The quantitative survey metrics validate this widespread sense of exclusion across the sample. When evaluating survey question “In which language do you most often communicate with hearing people?”, the data show that participants are forced to drop SSL entirely in public spaces, shifting to “spoken Serbian” or relying on family members to translate. This statistical pattern matches the qualitative accounts of daily adaptation, demonstrating that the Law on the Use of Sign Language has not built an open, accessible civic environment.

This structural isolation is strongly verified by the public visibility metrics generated from the hearing cohort survey. When evaluating the physical presence of the language within civil infrastructure, 53% of hearing individuals state that they have never once seen SSL used in any public space, administrative counter, or municipal office. This systematic erasure is mirrored across national media networks, where 65% of respondents report that they have never seen a single public event or television program interpreted in SSL, excluding standard late-night news briefs. This structural invisibility directly explains why public counters function as sites of institutional trauma for Deaf adults. However, the data proves that this lack of access is caused by a failure of state enforcement rather than public resistance. An overwhelming 88% of hearing respondents explicitly support increased state funding for professional SSL translation and interpreting services. Furthermore, 83% state that private and public corporations should be legally mandated to provide permanent sign interpretation for Deaf employees. The “statutory mirage” of the Law on the Use of Sign Language is therefore exposed as a failure of political will; the hearing public shows a massive readiness to finance accessible spaces, yet the state fails to execute the necessary mandates.

Analyzing these systemic public barriers required an intentional critical review of how language planning efficacy is assessed within municipal infrastructures. Field observations of interactions between signing youth and public service personnel in administrative and healthcare settings confirmed that frontline institutional gatekeepers frequently exhibit communicative resistance or overt irritation when presented with visual-manual gestures. Rather than a simple absence of service, this active communicative breakdown represents a clear operational manifestation of the policy-practice gap on the ground.

Documenting the systematic denial of accessible communication in public spaces forced a shift in the analytical framework away from evaluating the Law on the Use of Sign Language purely as a

collection of statutory texts. Instead, it became empirically necessary to reframe this theme around the structural reality of institutional trauma. The lack of localized enforcement and mandatory staff training transforms standard civic spaces into sites of marginalization, directly placing an unfair communicative and emotional burden on the independence and mental well-being of the minoritized language community.

4.3. Theme 3: Institutional Linguistic Deprivation and the Compensatory Agency of Horizontal Peer Networks

This theme addresses the educational environment of the signing community, focusing on the real-world execution of classroom language planning as outlined in the first foundational hypothesis of this project. While general policy initiatives, such as the national education development strategy, theoretically support the right to education in one's mother tongue, the lived reality within specialized schools reveals a deep structural breakdown.

Rather than finding an environment designed to support visual communication, students frequently encounter a staff with severe sign language fluency deficits. This instructional deficit transforms classrooms into spaces of communicative exclusion, forcing students to rely on their own collective agency and informal horizontal networks just to follow daily lessons.

4.3.1. Instructional Deprivation and Teacher Fluency Deficits

The qualitative evidence exposes a pervasive lack of linguistic competence among specialized educational staff, leading directly to immediate communication breakdowns during core lessons. When educators are unable to communicate fluently in the natural language of their students, the entire pedagogical structure breaks down, reducing instructional time to an exhausting struggle for basic comprehension. Participants describe this systematic barrier not as an isolated problem with specific teachers, but as a defining feature of their daily schooling. Alex describes this classroom breakdown clearly:

> They say something to me. I don't understand and I can't communicate with them but when they really don't know signs, then there is zero communication. [It would help] if teachers learned sign language better.[25]

This phrase "zero communication" exposes the complete failure of specialized education when teachers lack language proficiency. When an instructor can only project speech, the classroom ceases

[25] Original (Serbian): „Он мени нешто каже. Ја не разумем и не могу да комуницирам са њим али кад баш знакове не зна онда, ништа комуникација. [Помогло би] када би наставници боље научили знаковни."

to be an inclusive space and instead functions as a barrier. This dynamic forces students to continuously strain to decipher lip movements or written notes. This structural barrier is detailed further by Ace, who critiques the institutional expectation that Deaf children should bear the sole responsibility for bridge-building in the classroom:

> It depends from teacher to teacher. Some don't make any effort at all to learn sign language and then insist on speech, but I don't really speak at all. I can't manage to constantly read lips, but they don't have understanding for that. I think it is easier for them to learn sign language than for me to learn to speak. I constantly run into barriers.[26]

This testimony highlights the deep unfairness built into the school's current structure. The student correctly notes the logical contradiction of the current pedagogical approach: it is far more reasonable to expect a hearing professional to acquire a visual language than to demand that a profoundly Deaf child master lip-reading and oral speech within a complex academic setting.

By insisting entirely on speech-centric compliance, educators ignore the visual-manual nature of their students, turning what should be specialized support into a series of daily instructional hurdles. This institutional distance appears across multiple accounts; even Hard-of-Hearing students who maintain some spoken communication note that teachers actively avoid visual sign systems, choosing instead to focus entirely on oral speech.

4.3.2. Active Suppression and the Silencing of Student Advocacy

This lack of teacher fluency does not simply manifest as passive administrative inertia; it frequently escalates into active hostility and the open suppression of manual communication inside specialized classrooms. Rather than being embraced as a legitimate first language, SSL is occasionally treated by non-fluent staff as a disruptive tool or a mechanism for misbehavior. This ideological hostility isolates students and strips them of their ability to advocate for themselves or explain their perspectives during school conflicts. Noah provides a clear account of this targeted linguistic suppression by a substitute teacher:

[26] Original (Serbian): „Зависи од наставника до наставника. Неко уопште неће нимало да се потруди да научи знаковни језик и онда сам инсистира на говору, али ја баш ништа не причам. Не могу да разумем да нон-стоп да читам са усана, али немају разумевања за то. Мислим да је њима лакше да они науче знаковни језик него ја да научим да говорим. Стално наилазим на препреке."

> …she didn't know sign language, then she would get angry when the kids used it... It was difficult... Anne doesn't know how to speak, she only uses hands. And how did the two of them communicate? It was difficult.[27]

This narrative exposes how a teacher's lack of language skills quickly turns into professional resentment, where the instructor penalizes students simply for communicating in their primary language. For Deaf students who rely entirely on their hands, this environment is deeply silencing, making it impossible to actively participate in class or clear up basic misunderstandings.

This systematic erasure of student voice creates a culture of vulnerability where signing youth are routinely blamed for behavioral issues because they lack the institutional means to defend themselves. Ace describes how a simple interaction with non-teaching staff can degrade into an exhausting argument because of this language barrier:

> I asked the cleaning lady to unlock the gym so I could take a ball, but I simply couldn't explain it and she didn't want to unlock it for me. I really don't like that. And if someone knew a little sign language, communication would be easier and I consider that discrimination against Deaf people. I just wanted to take a normal ball to play, and I couldn't even do that. Plus, this is a school for the Deaf. I love Deaf people, but I don't like the teachers. We always argue and they always scold me as if I am guilty just because I can't explain my side of the story. I can't explain because I have no way to explain. Guilty or not guilty, I can't explain what the truth actually is.[28]

This testimony reveals how deeply disempowering the school environment can be. The fact that these routine misunderstandings occur within an institution explicitly designated as a school for the Deaf reveals a profound structural failure.

When the personnel running a specialized space cannot comprehend basic visual requests, the institution replicates the very same discrimination found in mainstream society. The student's phrase

[27] Original (Serbian): „...она није знала знаковни, онда се љутила кад су га деца користила. Било је тешко. Ен не зна да прича, она само користи руке. И како су њих две комуницирале? Баш тешко."

[28] Original (Serbian): „Ја сам тражио теткици да ми откључа салу за физичко да бих узео лопту али просто нисам могао да објасним то и није хтела да ми откључа. То ми се баш не свиђа. А кад би неко мало знао знаковни, онда би била лакша комуникација и то сматрам да је дискриминација Глувих. Ја сам само хтео да узмем обичну лопту да се играм а чак ни то нисам могао. Плус, је ово школа за Глуве. Волим Глуве, али ми се наставници не свиђају. Увек се свађамо и увек ме грде као да сам ја крив само зато што ја не могу да се објасним своју страну приче. Не могу да објасним јер немам како да објасним. Био крив, не био крив, не могу да објасним шта је у ствари истина."

“I can’t explain what the truth actually is” shows how a lack of bilingual staff silences young people, leaving them isolated and unable to access basic fairness or community resources within their own school.

4.3.3. The Emergence of Compensatory Peer Translation Networks

To survive this systematic deprivation, the student body forms horizontal networks of mutual assistance, with fluent signers and bimodal bilingual students stepping in to act as uncompensated classroom interpreters. When the official educational framework fails to provide accessible instruction, the children utilize their own linguistic capital to ensure no peer is left completely behind. This informal student labor becomes the primary mechanism for preserving basic classroom comprehension. Lia details her absolute reliance on classmates to follow her lessons:

> There used to be one teacher of mine. Communication was very difficult because she didn’t know sign language, and Lucy always helped me. She would translate for me and be like a link between us. So, always with someone’s help.[29]

This reliance on a peer to serve as a “link” shows that classroom accessibility is often maintained through the shared labor of the students rather than through institutional planning. This spontaneous peer-interpreting network is explicitly detailed by Victor, a Hard-of-Hearing student, who outlines how he steps in to buffer the communication gap between teachers and Deaf classmates:

> I actually use sign language in order to help those who don’t speak – Lucy, Devon and Jason. When the homeroom teacher asks Jason something and he doesn’t understand, I jump in, translate for Jason, and Jason answers the homeroom teacher. I serve as a translator.[30]

The phrase “I serve as a translator” highlights an advanced form of horizontal community support. Instead of focusing solely on their own education, bilingual students expend significant cognitive and emotional energy to manage the teacher’s communication gap, ensuring their classmates can understand and respond. Alex confirms that this student-led mediation is an organized, everyday

[29] Original (Serbian): „Пре је била једна моја наставница. Била је јако тешка комуникација зато што није знала знаковни и Луси ми је увек помагала. Она би ми преводила и била као нека спона између нас. Значи увек уз нечију помоћ.”

[30] Original (Serbian): „Ја заправо користим знаковни како бих помогао овима што не причају – Луси, Девон и Џејсон. Када разредна пита Џејсона нешто и Џејсон не разуме, ускочим ту преведем Џејсону и Џејсон одговори разредној. Служим као преводилац.”

survival strategy within the school structure: “Older children help younger children. When they see that someone is struggling with translation, they just step in front and translate.”[31]

While this mutual aid highlights the deep solidarity within the student body, its presence reveals a major policy failure. The state education system effectively externalizes the practical costs of accessibility, shifting the daily burden of language translation away from paid professional educators and directly onto the shoulders of the children.

The long-term consequences of this institutional neglect become even more stark when signing students attempt to transition from specialized secondary structures into the hyper-oral environments of higher education. Because the state’s inclusive policy frameworks fail to mandate permanent, professional interpretation networks within tertiary institutions, academic success becomes dependent entirely on an individual’s physical endurance and informal family support. Vance’s retrospective account of completing doctoral studies highlights the severe bodily toll of this forced self-reliance:

> I finished my doctoral studies and I did not have an interpreter. I fought entirely by myself until the very end. Of course, massive thanks go to my dad. I studied completely on my own, followed the lectures, and read lips. I am completely Deaf. It is incredibly exhausting. It is so hard on the eyes. Your eyes get profoundly tired when you have to concentrate entirely on reading lips for hours, plus I paint. I give immense thanks to my eyes. If I didn’t have my sight, God forbid.[32]

This narrative fundamentally reframes the critical sociolinguistic understanding of higher education access for minoritized language users. Within an audist state framework, the attainment of an advanced academic milestone is frequently celebrated by external observers as evidence of an organic, inclusive educational landscape. However, the participant’s retrospective text reveals that his success was achieved not *because* of the institutional architecture, but *in spite* of it. Survival within the university setting is won through intense, exhausting physical labor expended to cover up systemic institutional exclusion. Academic advancement is thus stripped of its equitable character and turned

[31] Original (Serbian): „Велика деца помажу малој деци. Када види да се мучи око превода овај само иступи испред и преведе.”

[32] Original (Serbian): „Ја сам завршио докторске студије и нисам имао тумача. Сам сам се борио до краја. Наравно, хвала много мом тати. Сам сам учио, пратио, читао са усана. Скроз Глув. Напорно је. Тешко гледам на очи. Изморе се много очи кад се концентришеш на читање са усана плус сликам. Много хвала мојим очима. Да немам очи, Боже сачувај.”

into an individual battle of physical resilience, leaving the student in a state of constant vulnerability that relies entirely on sensory organs and informal family networks to survive.

4.3.4. Survey Data Triangulation and Institutional Density

This qualitative reality matches the quantitative institutional metrics found in the descriptive school data records. The institutional documentation reveals that across the entire primary and secondary specialized school enrollment in the school year 2025/2026 (totaling 265 active students), a striking 180 individuals are formally registered with complex secondary diagnoses alongside their baseline hearing status. This means that the vast majority of the student body requires a highly nuanced, flexible, and visually fluent instructional environment to thrive.

Furthermore, the data sheets show a complex mix of assistive technologies across the school population, tracking 44 active cochlear implants and 41 standard hearing aid users alongside students who use no amplification devices at all. This high density of diverse communication styles and complex needs requires professional educators who are fully fluent in SSL and trained in bilingual pedagogical models.

This institutional documentation requires a critical re-evaluation of the classroom space, viewing it not merely as a site of individual teacher audism, but as an active manifestation of a structural policy collapse driven by the state's poorly managed inclusion strategy**.** The quantitative reality that 180 out of 265 enrolled students carry complex secondary diagnoses alongside their baseline hearing status proves that the modern specialized school has been structurally repurposed. Under the guise of progressive educational inclusion, the state has transformed what was historically a homogenous visual-manual sanctuary for the linguistic minority into a catch-all special education facility. This institutional change severely dilutes the linguistic capital of the classroom environment. Teachers who are already struggling with severe SSL fluency deficits are forced to manage highly diverse classrooms containing both signing Deaf youth and non-verbal neurodivergent children. Lacking the advanced training required to construct multi-modal, bilingual pedagogical frameworks, instructors fall back on rigid, speech-centric compliance tracks and therapeutic containment. Consequently, the state's inclusion strategy produces a paradoxical form of exclusion: it dilutes the linguistic integrity of the Deaf school, strips it of its function as a visual cultural haven, and abandons both teachers and students to manage structural gaps through uncompensated horizontal peer labor.

This educational deficit looks even more stark when contrasted with the curricular preferences expressed by the hearing public. While specialized schools continue to enforce speech-centric compliance and separate classrooms from fluent signing environments, a solid 62% of hearing survey respondents state that basic SSL instruction should be integrated directly into the mainstream national

school curriculum, while 33% remain unsure, and only a minimal 5% oppose it. This outside openness points to an unmapped path for status planning. The general public exhibits a strong interest in dismantling educational barriers, with 76% of hearing adults stating they would personally enroll in an introductory SSL course if it were made available. The instructional deprivation occurring inside specialized institutions like Stefan Dečanski is therefore not a reflection of societal rejection, but a symptom of rigid institutional traditions that continue to prioritize oralist assimilation over a visually rich, bilingual pedagogical environment supported by the public.

4.3.5. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis

When synthesizing the qualitative data regarding specialized educational environments, the collective testimonies of the youth expose a systematic pattern of instructional deprivation and hidden horizontal mediation. The narrative accounts describe a classroom dynamic where non-fluent educators rely predominantly on rapid oral delivery and text-heavy whiteboard instruction, accompanied only by sparse, non-fluent manual gestures that lack regular SSL morphosyntactic structure. Within this exclusionary environment, profoundly Deaf students experience immediate cognitive and linguistic fatigue, frequently leading to complete communicative disengagement from the lesson within the opening minutes of instruction.

The structural vulnerability of this top-down framework becomes critical when students are targeted with direct spoken questions that they cannot decode or process. To prevent these communication breakdowns from escalating into institutional reprimands or unfair academic penalties, fluent and Hard-of-Hearing peers systematically step in to execute immediate, uncompensated horizontal translation. By utilizing low-spatial, restricted signing beneath the physical perimeter of the desks, intentionally hidden from the instructor's direct line of sight, these peers decode the teacher's spoken input for their classmates and voice the Deaf student's signed responses back into spoken Serbian.

This hidden, cross-modal collaboration allows the classroom to appear functional on the surface, leaving non-fluent educators entirely unaware that the basic transmission of knowledge is being maintained through a shadow network of peer solidarity rather than formal teaching. Consequently, an analytical synthesis of these accounts demonstrates that top-down educational accessibility in specialized schools operates as an administrative illusion. The institutional design survives on the ground only because minoritized youth continuously expend their own limited sensory and emotional energy acting as uncompensated structural bridges, hiding their primary language from an oralist institutional gaze just to insulate one another from a system that cannot understand them.

These observational insights regarding classroom dynamics take on an added spatial dimension when tracking how signing students navigate the transition from specialized secondary facilities into hyper-

oral higher education environments. As highlighted by Vance's retrospective account in Chapter 4.4.3, the complete absence of a structured, state-mandated interpreter framework within tertiary institutions alters the physical parameters of learning. Without cross-modal support, academic survival shifts from a standard cognitive task to an intense act of physical and sensory endurance, where the student must maintain continuous, exhausting visual focus on lip-reading frames for hours at a time. This structural neglect effectively turns the physical act of looking into a form of intense, uncompensated sensory labor.

4.4. Theme 4: Existential Biopolitical Attrition—Technologies of Fixation and the Fragile Future of SSL

This macro-theme integrates the sociolinguistic, structural, and institutional dimensions analyzed across this project to address the overarching question of long-term cultural preservation within the contemporary SSL community. Top-down inclusion strategies often view medical advancements and mainstreaming as positive tools for social integration. However, the qualitative testimonies generated in this study reveal an acute biopolitical awareness among Deaf youth regarding the physical contraction and threatened future of their linguistic safe havens.

This systemic tension aligns closely with critical sociolinguistic frameworks exploring subtractive language shift, where dominant institutional structures undermine minority languages not through outright bans, but by treating them as medical deficits to be cured or erased through technology. Rather than viewing medical devices as simple tools for personal flexibility, signing youth view unmitigated clinical interventions as an existential threat to the survival of their cultural community.

4.4.1. The Threat of Demographic Attrition: Youth Perspectives on Clinical Intervention

The qualitative text contains striking evidence of systematic grief among the youth regarding the steady decline in their community's numbers. Participants track this demographic shift directly to the rise of cochlear implants and aggressive oral normalization pathways pushed by hearing parents and medical institutions. This mechanical intervention is seen as a force that isolates Deaf children from their natural visual community, cutting off the transmission of sign language between generations. Devon shares a detailed, structural prediction regarding the institutional erasure of his linguistic minority:

> There are fewer and fewer Deaf people. That is a problem, because they can no longer fight for that law to actually be put into practice. People clearly do not respect it. There are fewer and fewer Deaf people. There are fewer culturally Deaf people. I would really like Deaf people

> to be equal with hearing people. For them to open their hearts toward Deaf people, to understand what Deaf people want. For example, imagine 50 or 100 years pass and it actually happens. Deaf people have fought for their rights; they are equal with hearing people. And by then there will no longer be Deaf people here at all. The Deaf community will completely disappear. In the past there were many Deaf people, but now the number is decreasing because of cochlear implants, hearing aids, and then they move into regular schools...[33]

This narrative exposes how deeply macro-sociolinguistic shifts affect the emotional well-being of minority individuals. The participant identifies a tragic historical contradiction: by the time society implements legal equality, the community itself may cease to exist. This demographic shrinkage weakens their political power, making it impossible to enforce legal protections on the ground.

The cochlear implant is critiqued as an instrument of assimilation that forces children into speech-centric tracks, isolating them from cultural networks. This assessment is shared by Nate, who frames medical interventions as a structural barrier to the natural evolution of visual communication:

> I think that right now the general problem is that there are fewer and fewer Deaf people because of implants. If those implants stopped being used at all, then there would be more Deaf people and probably the language would develop more. Not the spoken language, but sign language would be used more. It would be used more because there would be more Deaf people.[34]

This perspective reclaims *Deafness* as a site of linguistic value, arguing that the community needs demographic density to protect and expand its unique language. From the youth's point of view, clinical interventions do not simply assist individual hearing; they shrink the physical space of the linguistic minority, disrupting the survival of their culture.

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[33] Original (Serbian): „Глувих је све мање и мање. То је проблем, јер они више не могу да се изборе за то да тај закон заиста уђе у праксу. Људи очигледно то не поштују. Глувих је све мање и мање. Све је мање оних културолошки Глувих. Ја бих много желео да Глуви буду једнаки са чујућима. Да отворе своја срца према Глувима, да разумеју шта Глуви желе. На пример, замисли прође 50 или 100 година и заиста се то оствари. Глуви су се изборили за своја права, једнаки су са чујућима. А до тада више уопште неће бити Глувих овде. Глува заједница ће се скроз угасити. Раније је Глувих било баш много, а сада се број смањује због кохлеарних имплантата, због слушних апарата, па онда прелазе у редовне школе..."

[34] Original (Serbian): „Ја мислим да је сад генерално проблем то што има све мање и мање Глувих због импланта. Када би престали да се уопште уграђују ти импланти, онда би било више Глувих и вероватно би се више развијао не језик, али било би више коришћенији знаковни језик. Више би се користио јер би било више Глувих."

Analyzing these accounts required a critical unlearning of my own interpretive habits regarding technological progress. My initial orientation to the field implicitly paired medical and technical advancements with an automated expansion of human capabilities. However, evaluating these narratives of collective grief forced me to recognize that when clinical interventions operate within an audist institutional framework, they function as mechanisms of linguistic displacement rather than neutral tools of accessibility. Subjectivity tracking during this phase pushed me to shift my analytical focus from technological utility to the structural violence of subtractive language shift, ensuring the text is read through the community's experience of cultural preservation rather than an outside narrative of medical progress.

4.4.2. Spatial Isolation and the Defensive Preservation of Cultural Safe Havens

This shared anxiety regarding cultural extinction creates an intense desire for spatial isolation and protective peer boundaries among the signing youth. Because mainstream educational and social environments routinely reject or misunderstand them, young people intentionally seek out exclusively Deaf social circles to protect their language and build a secure sense of belonging. Tara describes this defensive retreat as a direct response to mainstream social exclusion:

> I would like there to be more Deaf people. I really love Deaf people. When everyone is Deaf, then somehow, when the community is larger, we can do more different things. I really like that. But also, if someone who hears wanted to join. Because I, for example, cannot go to a school for hearing people, they don't accept me, I cannot be in their community, so I would prefer there to be more Deaf people, so there are more different societies.[35]

This focus on internal community building is reinforced by Jason, who outlines an explicit commitment to preserving an exclusively visual social landscape:

> I have communicated like this since I was little, it is my language and I am proud of it... my whole life I have only socialized with Deaf people, and because of sign language we can communicate and we really always spend time together. I think I will continue like that, to

[35] Original (Serbian): „Волела бих да има више Глувих. Ја обожавам Глуве. Када су сви Глуви онда некако кад је већа заједница и више различитих ствари можемо да радимо. То баш волим. Али када би неко ко чује хтео да се прикључи. Зато што ја, на пример, не могу да идем у школу за чујуће, они мене не прихватају, ја не могу у њихову заједницу, па бих више волела да је више Глувих, да има више различитих друштава."

only have Deaf friends. I would like there to be more Deaf people. That they are not so few as they are now.[36]

The desire for more signing children to be born and raised within the collective represents a powerful reclamation of cultural space. It reframes community survival as a positive goal, emphasizing that true human development depends on preserving secure language communities rather than forcing physical conformity. These accounts show that the youth view their community not as a temporary adaptive space, but as a permanent cultural heritage that must be fiercely protected from outside assimilation.

4.4.3. Quantitative Triangulation and Fieldwork Synthesis

When synthesizing the qualitative lifeworld accounts (N = 24) regarding specialized educational environments with macro-level institutional metrics and quantitative survey data from the hearing majority (N = 100), the real-world execution of educational language policy reveals a systemic divide between *de jure* statutory promises and *de facto* classroom accessibility. The qualitative accounts detailing teacher fluency deficits and speech-centric compliance tracks gain clear empirical validation when cross-referenced against institutional density records from specialized educational facilities. Data sheets from the Stefan Dečanski institution in Belgrade expose an enrollment profile that fundamentally challenges the assumption of a homogenous, visually fluent learning sanctuary: out of 265 total primary and secondary students enrolled in the school year 2025/2026, a striking 180 individuals (67.9%) are formally registered with complex neurodivergent or developmental profiles alongside their baseline hearing status, operating alongside 44 active cochlear implant recipients and 41 standard hearing aid users. Under the umbrella of national educational inclusion, specialized schools have been administratively repurposed into catch-all facilities without providing educators with specialized sign bilingual training. When non-fluent instructors are tasked with managing highly diverse classrooms without advanced training in SSL, they default to rigid, speech-centric compliance tracks that dilute the spatial density required for natural visual language transmission, transforming specialized classrooms into sites of instructional deprivation where Deaf youth experience rapid cognitive fatigue.

The structural vulnerability of this top-down educational framework is actively buffered on the ground through horizontal networks of compensatory peer labor. Fluent bilingual and bimodal

[36] Original (Serbian): „Ја од малена тако комуницирам, то је мој језик и поносан сам на то. Цео живот сам се само са Глувима дружио, баш због тог знаковног језика можемо да комуницирамо и стварно се увек дружимо заједно. Сматрам да ћу тако и наставити само Глуво друштво да имам. Ја бих волео да буде више Глувих. Да их не буде тако мало као сада.”

students systematically step in to act as uncompensated classroom interpreters, executing low-spatial signing beneath desk perimeters to decode oral lessons for their peers and voice signed responses back to non-fluent teachers. This shadow network creates a surface-level illusion of classroom functionality, allowing non-fluent educators and state administrators to claim inclusive compliance while externalizing the cognitive and emotional burden of accessibility directly onto minoritized youth.

Triangulating these educational realities with the quantitative dataset from the hearing cohort (N = 100) exposes a striking contrast between public openness to sign language integration and rigid institutional inertia. A 62% majority of the hearing public explicitly supports integrating basic SSL instruction directly into mainstream national school curricula (33% unsure, 5% oppose), and 76% of hearing adults state they would personally enroll in an introductory SSL course if made available. Yet, 80% of hearing respondents report having zero lifetime opportunities to learn SSL, and 82% possess zero to minimal sign literacy. These survey metrics prove that the instructional deprivation occurring inside specialized institutions is not a reflection of public hostility or societal rejection, but stems directly from institutional inertia, outdated oralist pedagogical traditions, and a failure by the state to enforce mandatory sign fluency standards for specialized educational personnel. Evaluating these educational gaps required a critical reassessment of my own positionality as a hearing researcher: while my initial expectation was that specialized schools would function as natural, visually fluent linguistic havens supported by top-down inclusion strategies, confronting the empirical classroom dynamics made it clear that educational accessibility in specialized Serbian schools is co-created on the ground through the unrecognized solidarity and uncompensated labor of the students themselves.

4.5. The Synthetic Conceptual Model

To translate these empirical findings into actionable insights, this final analysis synthesizes the qualitative themes and quantitative survey metrics into a comprehensive model. This model addresses the core research problem by mapping out why these findings are deeply meaningful and how they work together to explain the current sociolinguistic landscape of the SSL community. Rather than viewing language policy as a static set of bureaucratic rules, this framework treats it as a dynamic, shifting process where top-down institutional text constantly collides with bottom-up, lived human agency.

4.5.1. Theoretical Foundations: Merging Existing and Newly Developed Concepts

A truly adequate conceptual model must clearly distinguish between established theoretical constructs and the new, localized concepts developed through this empirical fieldwork. By tracing the friction

between these two layers, the framework explains the unique systemic challenges facing contemporary signing youth in Serbia.

1. Reconceptualizing Identity: Deafhood vs. Instrumental Tool Pragmatism

Existing sociolinguistic theory heavily relies on Ladd's concept of *Deafhood*, which frames sign language as an essential, life-defining core of cultural identity and group resistance. While this study strongly validates that model among multi-generational signing families (Theme 1), the field data led to the development of a new analytical concept, *instrumental tool pragmatism*.

This concept describes the perspective of Hard-of-Hearing youth, late signers, assistive device wearers and individuals from hearing households who deliberately separate their language choices from their personal identity. For these students, SSL is not an ontological anchor of belonging, but a functional, situational tool used to pass information when spoken systems fail. These concepts are closely related because they expose an internal cultural division within the student body. It proves that identity is non-monolithic and is directly determined by whether a child's early language exposure occurred in a supportive home environment or within a clinical, speech-centric tracking system.

2. Re-evaluating Policy Execution: Top-Down LPP vs. Compensatory Peer Labor

Standard LPP theory focuses on the division between status, corpus, and acquisition planning, often critiquing top-down legal mandates for failing to incorporate the views of local practitioners. This research advances that critique by introducing a vital new concept: *compensatory peer labor*.

This concept documents the spontaneous, horizontal translation networks constructed by fluent bilingual students to protect their Deaf classmates from classroom exclusion. When non-fluent state instructors create a total communication barrier, the children utilize their own linguistic capital to maintain basic instructional access. In the context of this study, these concepts are tightly linked: the horizontal labor of the children is a direct, mandatory response to the top-down failure of the state's inclusive educational policies.

3. Redefining Language Shift: Subtractive Bilingualism vs. Existential Attrition Panic

Classic language planning literature frames language shift as a passive, macro-level transition where a dominant majority language slowly replaces a minoritized tongue. This investigation deepens this framework by identifying a real, felt reality among the youth, which introduces with this research a new concept of *existential demographic attrition panic*.

This concept describes the active, localized grief experienced by signing youth as they watch their peer networks physically shrink due to unmitigated medical interventions (cochlear implants) and forced mainstreaming without signed support. These concepts intersect deeply because they show that language shift is not only an abstract statistical trend. It is experienced by minority youth as a direct biopolitical threat that closes down their secure spaces and signals the eventual extinction of their cultural sanctuary.

Formulating this integrated framework forced me to critically confront my own administrative preconceptions regarding LPP. Coming from an academic tradition that treats policy evaluation as an audit of statutory texts and ministerial strategies, my initial approach looked for systemic adjustments at the state level. However, the recurring evidence of instructional deprivation and horizontal student adaptation shattered this formalist approach. I had to explicitly track and check my tendency to center official legal frameworks over grassroots survival strategies. The final model directly reflects this interpretive shift, explicitly elevating the unrecognized, compensatory labor of the children above the symbolic text of state legislation to provide an accurate description of how accessibility is actually negotiated on the ground.

4.5.2. Analytical and Conceptual Implications of the Model

From a practical and managerial standpoint, this conceptual framework provides civic, educational, and public sector administrators with a clear roadmap to transition from empty symbolic compliance to substantive accessibility.

- **Reforming Educational Spaces:** For specialized school directors, the model proves that administrators can no longer rely on non-fluent teaching staff who demand speech-centric compliance. Instead of ignoring the informal translation networks running inside classrooms, managers must formally recognize this bilingual capability. This means establishing vocational tracks where older bimodal students are accredited and compensated for assisting their peers, transforming an exhausting survival strategy into a path for professional advancement.
- **Overhauling Civic and Healthcare Infrastructure:** For public health managers and public sector administrators, the matrix details exactly why broad legislation like the Law on the Use of Sign Language fails without local execution guidelines. Public services must transition away from fallback methods like writing on paper, which compromise privacy and strip patients of their agency. Managers must build permanent, accountable communication channels, such as on-site professional interpreters and verified digital relay systems, to transform traumatic, frustrating encounters into spaces of accessible, equitable care.

4.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a critical sociolinguistic discussion, analysis, and synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative data generated across this intrinsic case study, evaluating the real-world execution of LPP within the contemporary SSL community. By applying Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework, the lived experiences of twenty-four participants were organized into four distinct, deeply interconnected dimensions that capture the profound gap dividing top-down legal text from bottom-up street-level realities.

Theme 1 demonstrated that linguistic minority identity is non-monolithic, mapping a complex sociolinguistic spectrum that ranges from the cultural pride of generational *Deafhood* to the functional detachment of *instrumental tool pragmatism*. Theme 2 exposed the systemic policy inertia dividing *de jure* legal protections from *de facto* civic accessibility, documenting the structural barriers, communicative resistance, and institutional trauma that signing youth routinely encounter across public administration, national media, and healthcare environments. Theme 3 detailed the institutional linguistic deprivation running through specialized educational settings, illustrating how severe teacher fluency deficits create classroom barriers and force students to build informal, horizontal translation networks driven by uncompensated *compensatory peer labor*. Theme 4 evaluated the existential biopolitical attrition facing the community, showing how unmitigated clinical mainstreaming and technologies of fixation cause real demographic anxiety and a subsequent defensive retreat into protective linguistic spaces.

When viewed together, these themes reveal that the passing of the Law on the Use of Sign Language has created a symbolic mirage of inclusion that masks ongoing practices of linguistic marginalization. Rather than shifting the institutional burden of accessibility onto trained state personnel, contemporary language policy in Serbia shifts the practical costs of communication directly onto the vulnerable language minority. To bridge these operational gaps, the chapter synthesized these findings into a conceptual model. This model moves beyond purely symbolic legal validation by providing educational and civic administrators with a concrete blueprint to formalize, accredit, and fund grassroots community assets.

Continuous tracking of my own analytical assumptions throughout this process ensured that formal administrative frameworks were not prioritized over the informal survival strategies used by the children on the ground. This data-driven discussion establishes the empirical and theoretical foundation required for the final chapter, which systematically evaluates the study's initial hypotheses, outlines structural policy recommendations for public infrastructure reform, and maps out future quantitative research pathways targeting the broader hearing population.

5. CONCLUSION

This final chapter brings together the empirical, theoretical, and descriptive findings generated across this project to present a formal, comprehensive evaluation of the three foundational hypotheses that guided the study. By contrasting top-down legislative and administrative frameworks with the bottom-up, lived realities of contemporary signing youth in Serbia, this chapter moves past purely abstract policy analysis to evaluate how structural language laws affect actual human lives within minoritized language spaces.

The evaluation relies on the qualitative thematic patterns extracted from twenty-four deeply contextualized narrative interviews, cross-referenced against descriptive metrics from the baseline survey data and school infrastructure records. This process moves beyond a simple binary 'proven or disproven' determination. Instead, it uses a critical sociolinguistic lens to examine how top-down policy goals are actively re-interpreted, navigated, or subverted by the speech community on the ground.

5.1. Evaluation of Hypothesis 1: Educational Integration vs. Instructional Deprivation

The first hypothesis proposed that the formal recognition and integration of SSL within specialized educational environments would significantly enhance classroom inclusivity and boost academic outcomes for Deaf students. The empirical evidence generated throughout this study provides a complex, split evaluation that partially challenges this expectation, exposing a deep divide between official policy design and everyday classroom interaction.

At the administrative level, top-down integration strategies, such as the national education strategy until 2030, theoretically grant statutory permission for bilingual instructional models. However, the qualitative field data reveals that this structural permission does not automatically produce an accessible or supportive educational setting. Instead, due to widespread and severe sign language fluency deficits among specialized educators as detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1, the educational environment frequently functions as a space of institutionalized linguistic deprivation. Rather than experiencing a classroom environment optimized for their natural visual-manual communication, students document a daily reality of communication breakdowns and the active suppression of their primary language.

When instructors lack basic signing skills and rely almost exclusively on oral speech or text, the specialized classroom ceases to be an inclusive environment and instead functions as a major barrier to learning. This instructional deficit routinely paralyzes classroom communication, forcing students to rely on exhausting coping mechanisms like lip-reading or written notes. Furthermore, this problem is compounded by an institutional expectation that Deaf children should bear the sole responsibility

for bridge-building in the classroom. By insisting on speech-centric compliance, educators ignore the visual nature of their students, turning specialized instruction into a series of daily hurdles that can escalate into active hostility and the penalization of manual communication. This systemic deprivation causes deep frustration and limits students' ability to explain their perspectives or defend themselves during school conflicts.

The data proves that classroom inclusivity is not achieved through top-down policy design, but is actively maintained through a horizontal network of *compensatory peer labor*. Fluent bilingual and bimodal students spend significant personal energy acting as uncompensated, ad-hoc classroom interpreters to protect Deaf peers from academic exclusion and act as a communicative bridge with non-fluent teachers. These students serve as informal translators within the classroom structure, as demonstrated by the narrative profiles in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3, patching over structural cracks through uncompensated labor.

This qualitative breakdown is directly supported by the structural data found in the school infrastructure records detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.4. Out of 265 total primary and secondary students, a striking 180 are registered with complex secondary diagnoses alongside their hearing status. This high institutional density of multi-impairments means that classrooms require highly specialized, visually fluent instructional models to thrive. Instead, the school continues to rely on non-fluent instructors who demand speech-centric compliance, leaving the student body to patch over these structural cracks through uncompensated peer labor.

The systemic presence of audist gatekeeping within the educational architecture forces signers to undertake exhausting physical and cognitive labor to achieve academic success. Rather than receiving institutional accommodations, Deaf students are frequently forced to rely entirely on their own sensory endurance to survive higher education. Even when a Deaf individual achieves the highest academic milestones, their success is not a sign of an inclusive system; instead, it is won through intense, exhausting physical effort to cover up institutional neglect, as analyzed in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3, rendering academic survival dependent on the individual's sensory organs and informal family support networks.

This systemic failure of educational policy planning is further confirmed by the operational observations of adult signers working directly within the specialized educational system. Testimonies, detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.4.4, force a critical shift in how we interpret the educational realities of Hypothesis 1. The instructional deprivation documented across the transcripts is not merely a consequence of individual teacher neglect or outdated oralist traditions. Rather, it represents an institutional crisis of purpose caused by top-down state planning. By using specialized Deaf schools

as catch-all centers for diverse neurodivergent and developmental conditions, the state actively disrupts the spatial density required for natural sign language transmission and cultural socialization. The classroom ceases to function as an organic linguistic hub, turning instead into an administrative dumping ground. This dilution fractures the horizontal peer networks that signing youth historically built to survive educational barriers. Consequently, while top-down strategies formally celebrate inclusion, their street-level execution fragments the visual signing environment, speeds up linguistic attrition, and isolates the Deaf child within the very space designed for their protection.

Analyzing this first hypothesis required a careful review of my own interpretive assumptions regarding institutional structure. Early in the fieldwork, my natural tendency was to look for top-down, administrative explanations for classroom success, assuming that official curriculum texts and ministry guidelines dictated daily school interactions. However, witnessing the intense instructional deprivation and the spontaneous emergence of peer translation networks completely shifted my perspective. I had to explicitly monitor and check my instinct to center formal administrative paperwork over horizontal, human adjustments. This shift allowed me to see that classroom accessibility is not maintained by the state's inclusive policy frameworks, but is actively co-created on the ground through the unrecognized labor of the children themselves. My evaluation evolved from an analysis of official compliance to a documentation of this grassroots peer solidarity as the primary mechanism of academic survival within the specialized school system.

This systematic lack of state-level educational support looks even more stark when contrasted with the curricular preferences expressed by the broader hearing public. While specialized schools continue to enforce speech-centric compliance and isolate classrooms from fluent signing environments, a solid 62% of hearing survey respondents explicitly state that basic SSL instruction should be integrated directly into the mainstream national school curriculum, while 33% remain unsure, and only a minimal 5% oppose it. This outside openness points to an unmapped path for educational policy reform. The hearing public exhibits a strong interest in dismantling educational barriers, with 76% of hearing adults stating they would personally enroll in an introductory SSL course if it were made available. The instructional deprivation occurring inside specialized institutions is therefore not a reflection of societal rejection, but a symptom of rigid, outdated institutional traditions that continue to prioritize oralist assimilation over a visually rich, bilingual pedagogical environment supported by the public.

Therefore, while Hypothesis 1 is theoretically valid in assuming that sign language integration is necessary for academic success, it is practically challenged on the ground. Inclusive outcomes in contemporary Serbia are maintained by the informal solidarity and shared labor of the children themselves, rather than being built or supported by the state educational infrastructure.

5.2. Evaluation of Hypothesis 2: Legal Recognition vs. Street-Level Empowerment

The second hypothesis proposed that the official legal acknowledgment of SSL under the Law on the Use of Sign Language has positively influenced the social status and overall civic empowerment of the Deaf community in Serbia. The empirical evidence generated across the narrative accounts critically deconstructs this assumption, exposing a profound divide between *de jure* statutory text and *de facto* public space accessibility.

While the passage of the Act represents a valuable historical milestone and a symbolic victory for language rights, the field data demonstrates that it functions as a statutory mirage. Because state frameworks have failed to implement localized enforcement mechanisms, allocate dedicated budgets, or mandate systematic staff training, the legal protections granted on paper disappear the moment a young signer attempts to navigate public infrastructure.

The empirical data shows that basic civic, administrative, medical, commercial, and media infrastructures remain highly inaccessible to native signers, turning routine daily activities into sites of structural exclusion and institutional trauma. When entering standard public administrative environments, such as municipal offices, post offices, or banks, participants routinely encounter public sector employees who exhibit communicative resistance or are completely untrained in SSL. This lack of preparation shifts the entire structural burden of adaptation back onto the minoritized individual. This interaction, highlighted by the participant testimonies analyzed in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1, underscores a failure in macro-level status planning. The lack of frontline compliance forces the user to abandon their primary language and rely on fallback strategies like writing on paper or basic pantomime, which strips the communication of its efficiency and dignity.

This systematic exclusion becomes dangerous when entering public healthcare settings, where the total absence of professional interpreters or signing staff directly jeopardizes patient safety, accurate medical diagnostics, and informed consent. Routine medical visits frequently degrade into severe communicative crises, requiring slow, hyper-extended communication via written notes. The structural exclusion embedded within public health spaces is deeply worsened by a routine habit that can be conceptualized as *the clinical typist turn*. While top-down policy text promises equal access, focus group data from adult signers in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2, exposes how the physical movements of medical practitioners can directly trigger severe health crises. When a physician turns away from a Deaf patient to log data into a computer terminal while continuing to speak, all visual communication tracks, including lip-reading and facial expressions, are instantly severed. This systematic lack of communicative awareness can lead to dangerous, life-threatening consequences, such as misunderstood medication schedules resulting in severe medical complications. Furthermore,

when doctors refuse to accommodate a participant's specific voice, communication breaks down completely, forcing reliance on ad-hoc personal technologies or mobile phone notes.

This lack of support is further mirrored at other frontline spaces, such as the post office, where symbolic gestures of inclusion completely fail in practice. Even where public notices promise a designated Deaf window, no actual assistance or trained staff are available, as documented in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1, forcing users to fend for themselves through written notes. Consequently, without enforceable mandates and on-site professional networks, public spaces remain sites of profound administrative and physical vulnerability. Framing a standard healthcare appointment as a "hell" underscores the deep psychological strain caused by institutional neglect. This exclusion is further illustrated by a critical event where Deaf individuals are left entirely isolated during an emergency hospital procedure without immediate family support, forced to explain themselves through pantomime while dealing with non-fluent domestic staff or educators who cannot facilitate effective communication.

This narrative proves that the Law on the Use of Sign Language often operates as a reactive legal instrument used to address discrimination after a conflict occurs, rather than as a proactive tool to design an accessible public space. The participant's transition from panic to anger illustrates that without real-time, professional interpretation, basic safety and human dignity within state institutions remain compromised.

This implementation gap is not resolved by existing digital solutions, such as the state-supported SOS Video Relay Center. While participants value this service as a temporary tool, they document severe protocol fractures, unpredictable service drops, and serious breaches of translation ethics by remote interpreters who lack uniform professional certification. In live administrative and medical disputes, as detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.3, relay interpreters have been documented violating confidentiality protocols by translating statements users explicitly asked them not to filter, behaving rudely, or abruptly terminating video calls mid-session. When an interpreter abuses their linguistic position or disconnects unexpectedly, they strip the Deaf user of their agency, leaving them highly vulnerable in a hostile environment. This structural vulnerability extends to public media infrastructures. Mainstream television channels routinely omit professional sign inserts, leaving the community in a state of informational isolation, where an uninterpreted television screen functions effectively as if it were turned off.

Furthermore, when sign language or Deaf characters do appear in national media, the younger generation identifies it as an artificial performance that relies on hearing actors mimicking signs rather than providing authentic community representation or understanding actual Deaf culture.

This systemic policy failure directly restricts the long-term career opportunities and economic mobility of the youth, as analyzed in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.5, rendering short-term administrative tools ineffective against structural audist biases in the labor market. Advanced academic achievements and university diplomas still routinely lead to basic retail underemployment and systematic exclusion, as employers automatically reject qualified applicants the moment they learn they are Deaf.

This qualitative evidence of civic and economic exclusion matches the quantitative metrics extracted from the baseline survey data. Statistics confirm that participants are systematically forced to drop SSL when entering public spaces, relying instead on spoken Serbian or the informal presence of hearing family members to manage basic transactions.

This pattern of public space exclusion is heavily verified by the public visibility metrics generated from the hearing cohort dataset (N = 100). When evaluating the physical presence of the language within civil infrastructure, 53% of hearing individuals state that they have never once seen SSL used in any public space, administrative counter, or municipal office. This systematic erasure is mirrored across national media networks, where 65% of respondents report that they have never seen a single public event or television program interpreted in SSL, excluding standard news briefs. This structural invisibility directly explains why public spaces turn into sites of institutional trauma for Deaf adults. However, the survey data proves that this lack of access is caused by a failure of state enforcement rather than public resistance. An overwhelming 88% of hearing respondents explicitly support increased state funding for professional SSL translation and interpreting services. Furthermore, 83% state that private and public corporations should be legally mandated to provide permanent sign interpretation for Deaf employees. The “statutory mirage” of the Law on the Use of Sign Language is therefore exposed as a failure of political will; the hearing public shows a massive readiness to finance accessible spaces, yet the state fails to execute the necessary mandates.

Evaluating this second hypothesis required an intentional critical review of how language planning efficacy is assessed within municipal infrastructures. Entering the field, my initial approach was biased toward formalist legal metrics, leading me to treat the statutory existence of the Law on the Use of Sign Language as a primary indicator of progressive social development. However, analyzing the participants’ accounts of institutional trauma and frontline exclusion shattered this formalist approach. I had to explicitly track and check my tendency to prioritize official legislative text over street-level execution metrics. This analytical transition made it clear that passing a law without mandating local funding, staff training, and professional accountability mechanisms simply masks ongoing patterns of discrimination. It shifts the entire operational burden of daily access back onto

the minoritized community, turning statutory validation into a symbolic public relations exercise rather than a functional tool for street-level empowerment.

Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is critically challenged and deconstructed: the Law on the Use of Sign Language has raised the formal legal status of SSL on paper, but it has completely failed to guarantee street-level civic empowerment, operational safety, or reliable public space access for the contemporary signing generation in Serbia.

5.3. Evaluation of Hypothesis 3: The Intertwined Dynamics of Community Identity

The third hypothesis proposed that the personal identity and cultural values of the Serbian Deaf community are tightly intertwined with the socio-legal status and daily use of SSL, following the global sociocultural model of *Deafhood*. The empirical evidence generated across the participant narratives provides strong verification for this hypothesis, but heavily expands its scope by revealing a deep sociolinguistic stratification within the contemporary youth population. The data demonstrates that collective identity is far from a uniform or monolithic experience; instead, it operates along a highly contested fluid spectrum determined by early childhood language exposure, family background, and immediate peer socialization rather than basic biological categories.

For participants who grew up within multi-generational Deaf families, manual communication is experienced as an ontological anchor, a natural first language, and a profound source of group pride and ownership. Rather than internalizing a medical pathology framework that treats *Deafness* as a physical deficit, these individuals reclaim manual communication as a positive cultural asset and a birthright, directly challenging dominant institutional categorizations of disability. By framing SSL as primary and natural, these participants shift the social burden of communicative adaptation back onto the hearing majority, demanding conversational modifications rather than internalizing a sense of communicative failure. This deep investment manifests as a total lack of shame, an adoration of manual expression, and a rich, fluid linguistic repertoire that extends past national borders through digital spaces, showcasing an advanced, self-taught plurilingual competence in international and foreign sign languages as detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.2.

Conversely, the field data identifies a distinct conceptual counter-weight on the opposite end of the sociolinguistic continuum: *instrumental tool pragmatism*. For a distinct subgroup of late signers, Hard-of-Hearing youth, and individuals from exclusively hearing households, as explored in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.3, SSL is stripped of its cultural identity value and treated strictly as a functional, bimodal tool to pass information when spoken systems hit a physical wall. Due to intense home-language dissonance and parental pressure to speak, these individuals experience a practical

detachment from the Deaf community, treating signing as identical to spoken communication rather than a marker of cultural belonging.

This stratification creates real communicative friction, isolation, and boundary contestation within specialized school environments, where Hard-of-Hearing students who rely primarily on oral tracks or assistive devices must constantly negotiate their position within signing spaces. This internal division is further complicated by the physical management of hearing technologies. The daily handling of devices introduces constant communication vulnerabilities, such as sudden battery failures, which are examined alongside other technical divides in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4, disrupting comprehension and requiring speakers to slow down dramatically. Safety concerns during physical activities add another layer of displacement, forcing youth to navigate sections of the school day entirely disconnected from their sensory environment when removing devices to avoid damage.

Crucially, this deep internal friction is tied to a shared, overarching anxiety regarding *existential demographic attrition panic*. The youth exhibit a sharp biopolitical awareness that widespread clinical interventions, such as cochlear implants, combined with aggressive mainstreaming policies, are actively shrinking their cultural safe havens and reducing the number of culturally Deaf individuals. This perspective reframes medical devices not as neutral accessibility improvements, but as instruments of cultural shift that interrupt the intergenerational transmission of sign language and break down collective language solidarity.

Furthermore, this dissertation expands the traditional sociolinguistic framework of language shift by proving that *existential demographic attrition panic* within the Serbian signing community is caused by two simultaneous pressures: aggressive medical-clinical mainstreaming from the outside, and systemic institutional dilution from the inside. Prior research, reviewed in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2, typically attributes the decline of minoritized sign languages solely to cochlear implantation tracks and mainstream school placements. The empirical evidence generated in this study reveals a far more insidious policy dynamic. By using top-down inclusion frameworks to re-engineer specialized schools into general special-education facilities, the state dilutes the linguistic and cultural core of the Deaf collective. The specialized school is stripped of its status as a language sanctuary and turned into a catch-all therapeutic space, reducing the visibility and daily usage of SSL. This double attrition, where the child is drawn out of the signing community via medical mainstreaming on one side, while the specialized signing institution is hollowed out internally on the other, creates deep existential anxiety among users. It proves that state inclusion policies do not support minority language rights, but operate as a subtle, administrative tool for language shift that erases the visual heritage of the community.

This defensive anxiety produces an explicit demand for protective group boundaries and spatial isolation as a mechanism to preserve their visual heritage from mainstream assimilation. Participants document a retreat into defensive solidarity, as illustrated in Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2, expressing a preference for exclusively Deaf social networks and expanded internal community structures over forced exterior integration into a hearing society that fails to accept them.

Evaluating this final hypothesis required a critical unlearning of my own interpretive habits regarding technological progress and community cohesion. Entering the field, my initial orientation implicitly treated a shared visual modality as a natural guarantee of an unbroken, uniform collective structure. Simultaneously, I viewed medical advancements like speech implants through a standard progressive lens, treating them as simple tools that naturally expand individual human choices. However, analyzing these dense narratives of internal peer friction and collective demographic grief completely inverted these assumptions. I had to explicitly track and check my analytical tendency to apply generalized, outside definitions of progress onto a minoritized language space. This transition pushed me to look past the celebratory claims of medical brochures and see how clinical tracking operates as a force for subtractive language shift when managed by an audist state framework. My analytical focus shifted from documenting a simple, shared identity to detailing a highly fractured, defensive spectrum that is fighting a continuous battle for cultural preservation against systemic biopolitical erasure.

This defensive anxiety looks even more urgent when matched against the linguistic literacy scores extracted from the hearing majority survey and detailed in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.5. The quantitative data reveals a complete lack of public exposure that forces the signing community into a defensive space: a striking 63% of hearing respondents are completely unaware that SSL is officially recognized by law as a legitimate language in Serbia. This legal isolation is compounded by a severe deficit in public communicative capacity. When asked to rate their personal knowledge of sign language, 51% of hearing individuals report having absolutely zero knowledge (“1” on a 5-point scale), and an additional 31% report a minimal score of “2.” This means that 82% of the hearing public possesses effectively no functional awareness of SSL structure. This literacy vacuum is directly maintained by institutional gaps: 80% of the hearing population state that they have never had a single opportunity to learn or be exposed to SSL in their lives. While 47% of the public explicitly recognizes that SSL users face active social and institutional discrimination, 53% feel completely comfortable communicating with a Deaf individual using fallback methods like pantomime or written text. These figures show that the identity spectrum within the contemporary SSL community is shaped by having to build protective group boundaries against an outside hearing society that remains linguistically illiterate and largely anxious about direct cross-modal interaction.

This public literacy vacuum interacts directly with the internal bio-technical stratification of the Deaf community analyzed in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4 to validate the fluid, non-monolithic nature of Hypothesis 3. The empirical breakdown of the cohort—comprising 8 non-device visual signers, 13 bimodal hearing aid users, and 3 cochlear implant recipients—demonstrates that collective identity is actively fragmented by medical intervention tracks. Participants without devices experience SSL as an absolute ontological anchor, completely rejecting the medical pathology model. Conversely, hearing aid users navigate an anxious bimodal lane where identity is constantly threatened by mechanical device breakdowns or dead batteries. This tension reaches its peak among cochlear implant users, who face intense clinical oralist tracking that often alienates them from the fluent signing collective. These device counts prove that identity within the contemporary SSL space is not a singular biological category, but a highly contested spectrum shaped by whether a child's sensory world was embraced as a cultural right or managed as a medical deficit.

Consequently, Hypothesis 3 is supported in its foundational claim that identity and language daily use are inextricably linked, but it must be empirically and theoretically expanded: identity within the contemporary SSL community is not a singular, uniform experience. It exists as a complex, multi-layered spectrum shaped by household language history, peer tracking, and the continuous pressures of a dominant hearing society that positions their primary language as a medical deficit to be cured rather than a cultural right to be preserved.

This fluid spectrum is most clearly illustrated by the internalized audism and survey self-identification anomalies documented among the device-reliant youth cohort. The empirical fact that multiple Deaf students wearing cochlear implants or hearing aids actively checked the box for "Hearing" on the survey sheets provides undeniable confirmation for the internal stratification claimed in Hypothesis 3. This identity disassociation proves that the global model of *Deafhood* cannot be applied as a uniform blanket category within contemporary Serbia. Instead, the socio-legal status of SSL is continuously undermined by a medical pathology framework that successfully splits the minority community from within. By convincing device-wearing youth that they belong to the hearing majority, the state's clinical tracking framework breaks down collective language solidarity, reduces SSL to an instrumental fallback tool, and accelerates a subtractive language shift that leaves the signing community internally fragmented.

6. OPERATIONAL POLICY AND MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical findings of this case study demonstrate that the Law on the Use of Sign Language functions primarily as a symbolic statement rather than an actionable tool for daily accessibility. To resolve this systemic implementation gap, state institutions must transition from purely passive legal validation to an additive, multilateral approach. This chapter outlines concrete, data-driven recommendations designed to restructure educational administration, public infrastructure, digital relay frameworks, and labor markets across Serbia.

6.1. Educational Administration and Specialized School Reform

The profound gap between top-down inclusive policy text and the daily realities of classroom interaction requires an immediate overhaul of the pedagogical and administrative frameworks within specialized educational institutions. Historically, specialized schools like the Stefan Dečanski institution in Belgrade have operated under an oralist tradition that treats manual communication as a fallback option rather than a primary tool for learning.

To move beyond symbolic compliance with national strategies, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development, alongside local school boards, must introduce three concrete structural interventions:

1. Implementation of Mandatory Visual Fluency Audits

Educational administrators must establish regular, independent language fluency audits for all teaching, administrative, and auxiliary staff within specialized environments. The qualitative evidence proves that a teacher's lack of signing proficiency leads directly to instructional deprivation, reducing lessons to an exhausting struggle for basic comprehension. Staff members routinely shift the burden of communication onto students by demanding oral compliance and lip-reading.

- **Operational Mandate:** Fluency evaluations must be conducted by independent boards consisting of certified native signers from the Deaf community and applied linguists.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Educators who fail to meet baseline conversational and academic SSL proficiency standards must be placed on mandatory, intensive language training leaves. Retaining non-fluent staff in specialized classrooms must be treated as an administrative violation, shifting the institutional baseline from oralist assimilation to cross-modal integrity.

2. Institutionalization and Accreditation of Compensatory Peer Labor

School directors must formally recognize and fund the horizontal translation networks currently running inside their classrooms. The empirical data shows that the academic survival of Deaf students

relies entirely on the uncompensated cognitive and emotional labor of fluent bilingual and bimodal classmates who serve as an informal bridge between non-fluent teachers and the student body.

- **Operational Mandate:** Instead of treating this peer support as a hidden survival strategy, administrators must build a formal vocational track for older, fluent students, training and certifying them as peer mentors and classroom communication assistants.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** This labor must be accredited on student transcripts and tied to institutional stipends or scholarship funds. Formalizing this support changes an unfair structural burden into an empowering path for professional advancement and community leadership.

3. Overhaul of Visual-Manual Curricula and Instructional Media

Curriculum developers must design and distribute specialized educational materials adjusted specifically for the spatial and visual structure of SSL. The school data sheets reveal a high density of multi-impairments within the student body, with 180 out of 265 total primary and secondary students navigating complex secondary diagnoses alongside hearing loss. This density proves that standard, text-heavy curricula designed for hearing classrooms are fundamentally inadequate.

- **Operational Mandate:** School managers must phase out the practice of offering reduced, simplified content to Deaf students. This must be replaced by a heavy investment in digital video resources, interactive visual media, and bilingual learning materials where sign language structure guides the layout rather than being treated as a secondary addition.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Specialized schools must be equipped with modern digital recording studios, enabling students to submit academic assignments, essays, and examinations directly in SSL, ensuring equal access to advanced academic subjects.

4. Structural Delineation of Linguistic Minority Streams from Therapeutic Special Education Tracks

The empirical evidence demonstrating that the modern specialized school has become an under-resourced catchment area for diverse neurodivergent profiles requires an immediate structural re-differentiation of state funding and tracking frameworks. Under the current execution of the Serbian national inclusion strategy, the state uses Stefan Dečanski as an administrative clearinghouse for complex developmental configurations. This approach dilutes the linguistic capital of the environment and forces teachers to choose basic therapeutic containment over advanced sign bilingual pedagogy. To halt the rapid internal attrition of the signing environment, the Ministry of Education must execute a strict organizational division within specialized facilities:

- **Operational Mandate:** Specialized institutions must formally separate their administrative tracks into two independent, ring-fenced operational streams: a linguistic minority bilingual stream and a multimodal therapeutic support stream. The linguistic minority stream must treat SSL as the primary language of instruction, focusing on high-level academic curricula and cultural socialization for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students. The therapeutic support stream must cater specifically to children with complex secondary developmental conditions, utilizing multi-modal communication methods tailored to neurodivergent needs.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** State funding allocations must be explicitly ring-fenced by stream, ensuring that resources meant for sign language development, interpreter recruitment, and visual media production are protected and cannot be absorbed by general special education costs. Furthermore, teacher certification tracks must be split: educators assigned to the linguistic stream must undergo strict SSL fluency validation, while those in the therapeutic stream must be trained in neurodivergent-specific pedagogy. Separating these pathways stops the systematic dilution of the school's linguistic capital, preserves the specialized space as an authentic cultural haven, and ensures all students receive targeted, structurally accountable accommodations.

Formulating these specific administrative recommendations required a critical review of my own interpretive habits regarding institutional power. When entering the field, my initial approach was biased toward formalist, top-down administrative workflows, leading me to assume that policy execution issues could be solved by updating state-level monitoring checklists or curriculum texts. However, analyzing the children's accounts of navigating daily classroom exclusions completely overturned this outlook. I had to explicitly track and check my natural instinct to center state-directed paperwork over grassroots human adjustments. This analytical transition helped me see that true accessibility is not maintained by abstract administrative decrees, but is actively co-created on the ground by the students themselves. My recommendations evolved from suggesting typical top-down regulatory audits to directly championing the formalization and funding of the children's unrecognized collective labor.

6.2. Public Sector Infrastructure and Healthcare Reform

The deep implementation gap dividing the *de jure* protections of the Law on the Use of Sign Language from the *de facto* realities of public space navigation requires an immediate structural overhaul of state administrative and healthcare infrastructures across Serbia. The empirical evidence demonstrates that contemporary public spaces operate under an unstated assumption of oral dominance, which transforms standard bureaucratic counters, municipal offices, and clinical waiting rooms into active sites of social exclusion and institutional trauma for the signing minority.

To move past a system that shifts the burden of communication onto the individual through fallback strategies like pantomime or written notes, public service agencies and healthcare networks must execute targeted, structurally accountable reforms.

The state's failure to provide professional public interpretation services causes an unfair, long-term externalization of operational costs onto the Deaf individual's family unit. When entering critical administrative or legal spaces, the total absence of fluent staff forces Deaf adults to constantly rely on their hearing children, siblings, or aging parents.

This structural dependency turns routine family interactions into sources of deep personal guilt, where managing basic human needs is experienced as "bothering" loved ones. Because state institutions refuse to provide professional access, the Deaf citizen is forced into a state of emotional debt, having to express profound gratitude for basic rights that should be automatically guaranteed by civic policy.

1. Enforceable Frontline Bureaucratic Standards and Civic Audits

State-level administrative bodies, including municipal registry desks, police departments, social welfare offices, and post offices, must replace symbolic legal compliance with clear, enforceable operational mandates. The qualitative narratives highlight that young signers routinely face communicative resistance and minor structural humiliations when attempting basic civic transactions, such as obtaining official documentation or managing personal finances.

- **Operational Mandate:** Public sector institutions must implement mandatory, basic visual-manual communication training for all frontline administrative staff. This curriculum should be designed and delivered in direct partnership with local Deaf associations, focusing on functional, situational vocabulary rather than simplified general expressions.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Every municipal center and regional public agency must establish a designated, structurally verified accessibility track. Frontline desks must be evaluated through regular, unannounced civic audits led by independent Deaf advocates. Failure to provide an accessible interface or an immediate connection to professional linguistic support must be treated as a direct administrative violation, carrying formal civil sanctions under national anti-discrimination statutes.

2. Institutionalization of Permanent, On-Site Professional Medical Interpreting Networks

The consequences of this policy-practice gap become dangerously high when entering healthcare environments, where the complete absence of fluent communication directly jeopardizes patient safety, accurate medical diagnostics, and informed consent. The narratives expose severe patterns of medical marginalization, where routine appointments degrade into high-stress crises and emergency

procedures are conducted in complete linguistic isolation. To eliminate this systematic vulnerability, the Ministry of Health must structurally restructure clinical communication networks.

- **Operational Mandate:** The state must eliminate the reactive practice of relying on informal companions, non-fluent domestic staff, or unstable emergency video relay setups during critical medical events. Major clinical centers, regional hospitals, and primary health clinics must establish permanent, on-site positions for certified, professional SSL interpreters.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Access to a certified interpreter must be built directly into standard clinical reception protocols as a mandatory baseline requirement for patient intake and medical consent validation. Any diagnostic evaluation, surgical procedure, or therapeutic intervention conducted without verifying clear, professional cross-modal communication must be legally classified as a breach of medical ethics and patient rights, leaving the institution liable to structural discrimination claims.

Formulating these public sector and healthcare recommendations required a critical deconstruction of my own civic privilege as a hearing researcher. When entering this project, my analytical habits led me to treat frontline administrative desks and clinical waiting rooms as neutral, minor bureaucratic points, assuming that systemic failures were primarily caused by an abstract lack of state funding. However, analyzing the participants' dense accounts of medical trauma and public exclusion completely shattered this formalist approach. I had to explicitly monitor and check my natural tendency to analyze public infrastructure through a lens of institutional neutrality. This transition pushed me to recognize that public desks are active sites of power asymmetry, where a refusal to slow down speech or provide an interpreter represents a form of structural violence that compromises personal safety and civic autonomy. My recommendations evolved from suggesting vague public awareness campaigns to demanding strict, enforceable institutional accountability measures and permanent, professional interpreter placement within the state healthcare architecture.

6.3. Digital Relay Frameworks and Professional Standardization

The qualitative findings reveal that while digital adaptations like the SOS Video Relay Center offer a valuable short-term bridge, their real-world utility is heavily limited by unpredictable service quality, systemic protocol fractures, and critical breaches of translation ethics. Remote interpreters frequently abuse their linguistic position by ignoring direct instructions from users, altering statements during live disputes, or abruptly terminating video feeds mid-session.

To transform this unstable link into a secure, reliable tool for social independence, the regulatory frameworks governing assistive technology must be completely overhauled.

1. Implementation of Standardized Professional Certification and Ethical Codes

The state-supported SOS Relay infrastructure must move away from a casual assistance model and establish strict professional boundaries. Remote interpretation must be treated as a highly technical public utility subject to rigorous professional standards.

- **Operational Mandate:** The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, in coordination with national translation registries, must mandate a standardized, rigorous professional certification exam for all remote relay operators. This certification must include specific training modules on translation bounds, absolute confidentiality protocols, and strict neutrality guidelines during adversarial conflicts.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Relay operators must adhere to a legally binding ethical code. Any documented breach of this code, such as filtering a user's language, offering unsolicited personal opinions, or disconnecting from an active session without structural cause, must lead to immediate suspension of their operating license and formal disciplinary review, ensuring the remote system preserves rather than compromises user agency.

2. Establishment of Continuous Community-Led Evaluation Loops

To ensure remote digital services remain responsive to the needs of the youth on the ground, the administrative management of video relay centers must shift toward a model of community-led oversight.

- **Operational Mandate:** Relay center budgets must fund the development of an independent, accessible digital platform where users can submit real-time, visual-manual feedback regarding service quality, translation accuracy, and professional conduct immediately following a call.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** This feedback dataset must be monitored monthly by an independent oversight board comprising elected representatives from the youth signing community and Deaf advocacy networks. Service providers must link remote operator performance metrics directly to institutional contract renewals, ensuring that top-down digital systems remain fully accountable to the grassroots community they are designed to serve.

Formulating these digital and technical recommendations required a critical review of my own interpretive assumptions regarding technological fixes. Coming from an academic background that frequently highlights digital innovation as an automated, positive equalizer, my initial approach viewed the existence of video relay systems as an automatic solution to physical space exclusion. However, analyzing the participants' testimonies regarding protocol fractures and broken translation

boundaries forced me to re-evaluate this uncritical view of technology. I had to explicitly catch and check my natural bias toward treating digital platforms as inherently neutral or self-correcting safety nets. This realization helped me see that without strict professional regulation and community oversight; digital platforms can replicate and intensify the very power asymmetries they are meant to solve. My recommendations shifted from advocating for basic technological expansion to designing rigorous professional monitoring mechanisms and community-led feedback loops.

6.4. Labor Market Interventions and Structural Employment Reform

The systemic waste of human talent and intellectual capital documented within the signing community reveals that current state labor policies are entirely insufficient for managing the transition from education to economic independence. As shown by the qualitative data, even when a young signer overcomes educational barriers and earns an advanced university degree, the mainstream labor market routinely excludes them due to deeply entrenched audist biases and a lack of workplace accommodations. Short-term digital bridges like the SOS Relay Center cannot dismantle these deep structural barriers to employment.

When employers automatically treat a non-speaking applicant as an operational risk or a financial liability, it creates a pattern of severe underemployment. This dynamic is clearly documented in the transcripts, where a university diploma still leads to basic retail underemployment. To reverse this trend and ensure economic equity, the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, in partnership with national economic chambers, must introduce three targeted structural reforms:

1. Enactment of Strict Anti-Discrimination Penalties and Independent Corporate Audits

State frameworks must transition from purely passive employment quotas to active, enforceable regulatory penalties that target corporate hiring gatekeepers. The current system allows employers to bypass hiring mandates by paying minor non-compliance fees, which fails to alter the underlying exclusionary practices of the labor market.

- **Operational Mandate:** The National Employment Service (*NSZ*), working alongside civil rights ombudsmen, must establish an independent regulatory audit board to monitor corporate hiring practices. Companies must be required to provide transparent, documented justifications for rejecting qualified signing applicants who possess the requisite technical and academic credentials.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** If a company automatically rejects an applicant based on their hearing status, it must be treated as a violation of national labor laws, carrying substantial financial penalties. The funds collected from these non-compliance penalties must be funneled

directly into a national accessibility fund to support workplace adaptations across other enterprises.

2. Substantive Workplace Accommodation Subsidies and Communication Budgets

To lower the perceived operational costs of integrating signing professionals into high-skilled environments, the state must directly subsidize workplace communication accommodations. Mainstream enterprises often use a lack of accessible infrastructure to justify structural exclusion, assuming that providing communication access is a corporate burden.

- **Operational Mandate:** The state must build a dedicated funding network that allows private and public enterprises to claim full tax credits or direct reimbursements for the costs of hiring professional SSL interpreters during critical corporate events. This includes funding interpretation services for job interviews, onboarding, professional training sessions, and key operational meetings.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Large enterprises and public sector institutions must be required to integrate high-speed digital equipment capable of connecting immediately to certified video relay services at every internal workstation. This shifts the operational expectation from verbal dependency to a flexible, multi-modal corporate environment, ensuring signing employees can exercise their professional capabilities on equal terms.

3. Establishment of High-Skill Affirmative Action and Public Sector Placement Tracks

The state must actively intervene to break the pattern of retail underemployment by designing specialized career support programs within high-skilled, white-collar sectors and public administration bodies.

- **Operational Mandate:** The Ministry of Labor must establish targeted professional placement programs that connect university-educated Deaf youth directly with technical, administrative, and research roles across state ministries, municipal structures, and state-owned enterprises.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Public institutions must lead by example, dedicating a specific percentage of their professional civil service positions to qualified individuals from the signing community. These positions must be backed by permanent, structurally verified linguistic support networks, ensuring that advanced educational achievements lead directly to professional career advancement rather than forced entry into low-wage retail labor.

Formulating these labor market and economic recommendations required an intentional, critical deconstruction of my own assumptions regarding employment and social mobility. Coming from an academic background that implicitly treats higher education as an organic equalizer, my initial

orientation leaned toward recommending career-counseling programs or resume-building workshops for Deaf graduates. However, confronting the empirical data regarding highly qualified signing youth being automatically rejected the moment their hearing status was disclosed shattered this meritocratic illusion. I had to explicitly track and check my natural bias toward free-market or skill-centric solutions. This analytical transition forced me to recognize that employment exclusion is not a result of a skills deficit within the Deaf community, but is actively maintained by systemic audist discrimination across public and private corporate environments. Consequently, my recommendations shifted from superficial placement support to demanding strict, legally enforceable anti-discrimination penalties, corporate accessibility mandates, and targeted state-funded accommodation subsidies.

6.5. Theoretical Contributions to Critical Sociolinguistics

Beyond providing practical, data-driven recommendations for public infrastructure reform, the findings of this project offer distinct conceptual advancements to the broader field of critical sociolinguistics and language policy planning (LPP). By evaluating the lived realities of twenty-four signing youth within a marginalized sociolinguistic environment, this research moves past standard, top-down analytical models that treat minority communities as uniform entities.

Instead, it introduces three new localized concepts that deepen our understanding of how language planning, identity formation, and macro-level biopolitical pressures interact on the ground.

6.5.1. Deconstructing Monolithic Identity: Instrumental Tool Pragmatism

By unpacking the nuances of *instrumental tool pragmatism*, this dissertation contributes to critical sociolinguistics by challenging the assumption that shared sensory profiles automatically create uniform community spaces. The data demonstrates that when a state framework enforces a speech-centric model, it creates a highly stratified linguistic landscape. Late signers, Hard-of-Hearing and individuals wearing assistive devices do not experience the specialized classroom as an immediate cultural sanctuary. Instead, they frequently navigate spaces of deep communicative dissonance and conversational isolation. This linguistic distance is not a simple interpersonal misunderstanding; it is a structural outcome of an educational tracking system that forces cross-modal negotiation without providing uniform bilingual resources. Consequently, identity ownership within the signing collective must be understood as a complex, negotiated spectrum rather than a monolithic category.

For this distinct subgroup, SSL is not experienced as an ontological core of belonging, but functions as a practical, situational tool utilized to pass information within specialized schools when spoken systems fail. Introducing this concept moves the academic field forward by proving that linguistic minority identity is non-monolithic. Identity operates as a fluid, highly stratified spectrum determined

by household language history and early childhood socialization paths rather than simple biological or medical categories.

It provides researchers with an analytical framework to examine the internal cultural borders and lateral social friction that occur within marginalized speech communities, challenging the common outside assumption that a shared visual modality automatically produces a uniform collective loyalty.

6.5.2. Redefining Policy Execution: Compensatory Peer Labor

Standard critical language policy literature focuses extensively on the division between official *de jure* legislation and local *de facto* execution, often critiquing top-down legal mandates for ignoring the views of street-level practitioners. This research deepens this framework by introducing the concept of *compensatory peer labor*. This concept documents the spontaneous, horizontal translation networks constructed by fluent bilingual and bimodal students to protect Deaf classmates from systemic academic exclusion.

When non-fluent state educators create a total communication barrier, classroom accessibility is not maintained by institutional planning, but is actively co-created through the uncompensated cognitive and emotional labor of the children themselves. Introducing this concept to critical sociolinguistics redefines how human agency is analyzed within broken institutional environments.

It proves that minoritized populations do not just passively navigate or resist top-down policy gaps; instead, they build highly complex, horizontal safety nets that keep the state's flawed educational infrastructure running. This framework forces language planning theorists to evaluate the hidden labor costs of inclusive education, demonstrating that the state effectively externalizes the practical costs of accessibility away from paid professionals and directly onto the shoulders of vulnerable children.

6.5.3. Redefining Language Shift: Existential Demographic Attrition Panic

Traditional language planning literature typically frames language shift as a passive, macro-level historical transition where a dominant majority language slowly replaces a minoritized tongue due to socio-economic pressures. This study advances this framework by identifying a real, felt emotional reality among contemporary youth: *existential demographic attrition panic*. This concept captures the active, localized anxiety experienced by signing youth as they watch their peer networks physically shrink due to unmitigated medical interventions (cochlear implants) and aggressive oral mainstreaming tracks pushed by state networks.

From the perspective of the youth, technologies of fixation are not experienced as neutral accessibility tools, but function as instruments of cultural shift that interrupt the intergenerational transmission of

sign language. Introducing this concept to sociolinguistics reframes language shift from a passive statistical trend into an active biopolitical threat.

It provides an empirical framework to examine how the physical contraction of minority language spaces produces a defensive focus on group boundaries, driving youth to seek spatial isolation and exclusively Deaf social networks to preserve their visual heritage from mainstream assimilation. This concept highlights that language preservation cannot be achieved through symbolic legislation alone; it requires the protection of the actual demographic spaces where the language lives and grows.

6.6. Institutional Limitations

6.6.1. Methodological Boundaries and Institutional Scope

While this study provides a highly detailed, critical sociolinguistic analysis of the contemporary SSL community, this research requires an explicit acknowledgment of its structural and methodological boundaries. Following Braun and Clarke's qualitative thematic framework, this investigation prioritized interpretive depth, narrative nuance, and systemic contextualization over statistical generalizability. The participant sample was purposefully restricted to twenty-four deeply involved signing youth primarily situated within or recently graduated from specialized educational contexts, such as the Stefan Dečanski institution in Belgrade.

Consequently, while these dense qualitative accounts offer an accurate window into the frontline execution of the Law on the Use of Sign Language, they cannot be uncritically generalized to represent the entire Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing population across rural or economically isolated regions of Serbia, where access to specialized visual-manual networks is even more restricted.

Furthermore, the institutional scope of this case study focused on the friction occurring within specialized secondary education and initial public sector interactions. It did not fully map the distinct sociolinguistic variations present within older generations of signers or the highly specialized professional terminology used by senior court interpreters.

Recognizing these boundaries does not diminish the empirical validity of the findings; rather, it establishes the necessary boundaries for interpreting the data, proving that the documented patterns of instructional deprivation, *compensatory peer labor***,** and *existential demographic attrition panic* serve as localized diagnoses of an ongoing institutional crisis rather than absolute statistical metrics for the entire Western Balkan region.

6.6.2. Empirical Insights from the Quantitative Triangulation Phase

Rather than remaining a purely proposed future track, the quantitative verification phase of this project was successfully field-tested and executed through the deployment of the Hearing Population

Survey Instrument ($N = 100$). The pilot data successfully completes the explanatory sequential mixed-methods loop, providing a statistical lens to interpret the systemic barriers identified by our signing participants. The survey data reveals that while hearing citizens live in a state of chronic linguistic separation, with 65% not knowing a single Deaf person and 82% lacking basic sign literacy, they possess a highly progressive awareness regarding systemic discrimination. A clear 70% of hearing respondents explicitly state that SSL users face active social and institutional discrimination in Serbia, while 25% remain unsure, and only 4% deny its existence.

This widespread recognition of discrimination explains why public willingness to support legislative reform is exceptionally high across all age and educational brackets. However, the survey also uncovers the behavioral roots of the communication barriers that Deaf signers face daily. When asked how comfortable they would feel communicating with a Deaf individual using fallback methods like pantomime or written text, 53% of hearing adults felt completely comfortable ("5" or "4" on a 5-point scale), while the remaining 47% exhibited varying degrees of communicative anxiety and hesitation (selecting scores of "3" or lower).

This communicative anxiety directly explains why routine public encounters often turn into sites of awkwardness, irritation, or sudden withdrawal by hearing staff. The hearing majority recognizes structural bias on paper and supports state-funded interpreter expansion, yet lacks the personal interactive confidence to bridge the gap face-to-face. By providing state ministries with an empirical tool to track public attitudes across varying regional and administrative cohorts, this phase transforms individual qualitative testimonies into an undeniable, statistically verified platform for long-term status planning and civil rights enforcement.

6.6.3. Epistemological Positionality and Concluding Synthesis

Navigating the sociolinguistic landscape of the SSL community requires an explicit, reflexive interrogation of the researcher's own epistemological positionality. As a hearing researcher entering a historically marginalized visual-manual space, I had to continuously recognize that the act of observing, recording, and translating manual signs into spoken or written text involves an inherent exercise of structural power.

Entering the field, my initial orientation leaned toward evaluating language policy through official state documents, curriculum texts, and legislative compliance checklists. However, witnessing the severe classroom communication breakdowns and the spontaneous emergence of horizontal translation networks forced a complete shift in my analytical framework. I had to consciously stop prioritizing formal state paperwork over grassroots human adaptations. This shift allowed me to see that true accessibility on the ground is not maintained by the state's symbolic policy frameworks, but

is actively co-created through the unrecognized, uncompensated labor of the children and families themselves.

By embracing this critical positionality, the concluding synthesis of this dissertation moves beyond a simple description of language barriers, delivering instead an indictment of systemic policy inertia and institutional dilution. The empirical evidence gathered across generations deconstructs the Law on the Use of Sign Language, exposing it as a statutory mirage. The state uses formal legal text to project a symbolic image of human rights compliance while leaving public sector infrastructure completely inaccessible.

This policy-practice gap is vividly illustrated by the life-threatening realities of *the clinical typist turn* in healthcare settings, where doctors sever visual communication tracks by turning to type, and by the "blind counters" of public offices where Deaf adults are forced into primitive pantomime. Furthermore, this study reveals that the state's national inclusion strategy has paradoxically speeded up language shift from the inside out. By using specialized Deaf schools as catch-all centers for diverse neurodivergent and developmental profiles, the state actively dilutes the linguistic density required to preserve SSL as a vibrant minority heritage language. This hollowing out of specialized spaces forces individuals into an unfair dependence on their hearing relatives, turning basic daily transactions into sources of deep personal guilt and family burden.

Ultimately, the mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design implemented in this project locks these qualitative accounts of institutional trauma into an unshakeable statistical foundation. The empirical data generated from the hearing majority survey (N = 100) proves that street-level exclusions are directly driven by a widespread public literacy vacuum that the state refuses to address. With 63% of the hearing public unaware of the language's legal status, 82% possessing zero functional sign literacy, and 80% completely shut out from any lifetime opportunity for exposure, the signing community is left stranded within an intensely isolated communicative environment.

Crucially, because 88% of the public explicitly supports state funding for professional interpreters, and 62% supports integrating sign language into mainstream school curricula, this dissertation proves that the ongoing marginalization of SSL is not a reflection of societal hostility. Rather, it is a structural consequence of an oralist state framework that treats a vibrant linguistic minority as a medical pathology to be contained rather than a cultural asset to be preserved. This dissertation serves as both an analytical record of that struggle and an actionable blueprint to dismantle these hidden systems of exclusion, demanding an immediate transition from symbolic constitutionalism to true, structurally accountable language equity.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Building upon the foundational contributions of this dissertation, which the author deems a deeply valuable endeavor both academically and socially, several pathways for subsequent academic inquiry emerge. This research holds exceptional value and fills a critical academic gap primarily because sign languages remain largely under researched within the Serbian context, particularly from a critical sociolinguistic and language policy direction. By bridging the critical divide between *de jure* language policy and *de facto* accessibility within the SSL community and establishing the profound scholarly and societal worth of documenting street-level language practices, institutional traumas, and marginalized community adjustments, this exploratory study provides a robust empirical and theoretical platform from which future research can expand.

First, a primary avenue for future research involves broadening the geographical and institutional scope of this inquiry. Because this case study purposefully restricted its qualitative parameters to a sample situated primarily within urban specialized educational contexts, specifically the Stefan Dečanski institution in Belgrade, the findings cannot be uncritically generalized to represent the entire Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing population across Serbia. Future studies should investigate marginalized spaces in rural, peripheral, or economically isolated regions of the country, where access to specialized networks is even more restricted. Such research would determine whether patterns of instructional deprivation and structural exclusion are amplified outside the administrative capital.

Second, future sociolinguistic research should encompass greater demographic and generational diversity within the signing community. This project focused heavily on the lived realities, peer networks, and identity formations of the contemporary signing youth cohort. Subsequent investigations should systematically map the distinct sociolinguistic variations, language attitudes, and historical trajectories present within older generations of adult signers who navigated different socio-political eras in Yugoslavia and Serbia. Additionally, research is needed to explore the highly specialized professional registers, terminologies, and translation ethics utilized by senior court interpreters and professional relay operators within legal and administrative frameworks.

Third, the quantitative triangulation phase executed in this study provides a validated baseline that is structurally optimized for full-scale, nationwide deployment. The pilot sample of the Hearing Population Survey Instrument (N = 100) successfully exposed a profound public literacy gap alongside widespread communicative anxiety and a strong public readiness to finance accessible spaces. Future researchers should deploy a similar survey instrument across diverse regional, socioeconomic, and administrative cohorts throughout Serbia. Scaling this inventory nationwide will

provide state ministries with an empirical tool to track public attitudes, forming a statistically verified platform for long-term status planning and civil rights enforcement.

Fourth, the new localized concepts introduced in this dissertation, *instrumental tool pragmatism*, *compensatory peer labor*, and *existential demographic attrition panic*, require further empirical testing and theoretical refinement across different minoritized language spaces. Future studies should evaluate these frameworks within other sign language communities in the Western Balkan region or among global encounters facing similar pressures of clinical mainstreaming and internal institutional dilution, examining how these defensive boundary mechanisms and horizontal survival networks operate in diverse contexts will deepen the theoretical scope of critical sociolinguistics and language policy planning.

Finally, future applied research should monitor and evaluate the practical implementation of the administrative and structural reforms proposed in this study. Specifically, longitudinal studies are needed to track the operational efficacy of separating specialized educational tracks into an independent Linguistic Minority Bilingual Stream and a Multi-Modal Therapeutic Support Stream. Researchers should examine how this structural delineation affects natural sign language transmission, teacher training certification, and resource allocation within specialized facilities over time. By tracking these street-level execution metrics, future inquiries will continue the transition from symbolic constitutionalism to true, structurally accountable language equity.

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9. APPENDIX

SECTION A: Cross-Cohort Mapped Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The table below presents the mapped semi-structured interview protocol across all three age cohorts: Children (7–18 years) and Adults (19+ years). Every main question and sub-question from the original field protocol files is preserved verbatim in Serbian alongside its English translation.

Thematic Domain	**Group 1: Children (7–18 yrs)**		**Group 2: Adults (19+ yrs)**	
Focus	**Serbian (SRB)**	**English (ENG)**	**Serbian (SRB)**	**English (ENG)**
Domain 1: Language Acquisition & Early Exposure	**Главно питање 1:** Можеш ли да испричаш како си научио/ла српски знаковни језик (СЗЈ)? **Подпитања:** • Када си први пут почео/ла да користиш знаковни језик? • Ко те је научио знаковни језик? • Да ли се знаковни језик користи код куће? • Да ли је тешко разговарати са људима који не знају знаковни језик?	**Main Question 1:** *Can you tell me how you learned Serbian Sign Language (SSL)?* **Sub-questions:** • *When did you first start using sign language?* • *Who taught you sign language?* • *Is sign language used at home?* • *Is it hard to talk to people who do not know sign language?*	**Главно питање 1:** Можете ли описати своје искуство одрастања уз српски знаковни језик (СЗЈ)? **Подпитања:** • Када сте први пут научили СЗЈ? • Да ли се СЗЈ користио у Вашем дому, или сте морали да га научите изван породице? • Како је учење СЗЈ обликовало вашу интеракцију са другима? • Ако сте прво научили говорни српски, како је изгледао прелазак на СЗЈ?	**Main Question 1:** *Can you describe your experience of growing up with Serbian Sign Language (SSL)?* **Sub-questions:** • *When did you first learn SSL?* • *Was SSL used in your home, or did you have to learn it outside the family?* • *How did learning SSL shape your interaction with others?* • *If you first learned spoken Serbian, what was the transition to SSL like?*
Domain 2: Deaf Identity & Self-Perception	**Главно питање 2:** Како се осећаш када користиш знаковни језик? **Подпитања:** • Да ли ти је пријатно када разговараш знаковним језиком? • Да ли волиш да разговараш са другим Глувим људима на знаковном језику? • Да ли ти је лакше да покажеш осећања знаковним језиком или говором/писањем?	**Main Question 2:** *How do you feel when you use sign language?* **Sub-questions:** • *Do you feel comfortable when talking in sign language?* • *Do you like talking to other Deaf people in sign language?* • *Is it easier for you to express feelings through sign language or through speech/writing?*	**Главно питање 2:** Како коришћење СЗЈ обликује ваш осећај идентитета као Глуве особе? **Подпитања:** • Да ли бисте рекли да је СЗЈ за вас више од језика? Како? • Да ли сте се икада осећали другачије од других Глувих особа на основу тога колико користите СЗЈ? • Да ли се осећате повезано са широм заједницом Глувих због СЗЈ?	**Main Question 2:** *How does using SSL shape your sense of identity as a Deaf person?* **Sub-questions:** • *Would you say that SSL is more than a language to you? How?* • *Have you ever felt different from other Deaf people based on how much you use SSL?* • *Do you feel connected to the broader Deaf community because of SSL?*

Thematic Domain	Group 1: Children (7–18 yrs)		Group 2: Adults (19+ yrs)	
Domain 3: Deaf Community Dynamics & Peer Acceptance	**Главно питање 3:** Када упознаш другу Глуву децу, како најчешће разговарате? **Подпитања:** • Да ли сва Глува деца користе знаковни језик на исти начин? • Да ли си некада упознао/ла некога ко користи другачије знакове? • Да ли ти се допада када чујући људи уче знаковни језик?	**Main Question 3:** *When you meet other Deaf children, how do you usually talk to each other?* **Sub-questions:** • *Do all Deaf children use sign language in the same way?* • *Have you ever met someone who uses different signs?* • *Do you like it when hearing people learn sign language?*	**Главно питање 3:** Да ли сте се икада осећали више или мање прихваћеним у заједници Глувих на основу начина на који користите СЗЈ? **Подпитања:** • Да ли сте упознали друге Глуве особе које су имале потешкоћа у комуникацији због различитих нивоа вештине СЗЈ? • Да ли сте икада осећали притисак да користите говорни српски уместо СЗЈ? • Како се осећате поводом тога да чујући људи уче СЗЈ?	**Main Question 3:** *Have you ever felt more or less accepted in the Deaf community based on the way you use SSL?* **Sub-questions:** • *Have you met other Deaf people who had communication difficulties due to different levels of SSL proficiency?* • *Have you ever felt pressure to use spoken Serbian instead of SSL?* • *How do you feel about hearing people learning SSL?*
Domain 4: Legal Recognition & Language Policy	**Главно питање 5:** Да ли си некада видео/ла знаковни језик на телевизији, у школи или на другим местима? **Подпитања:** • Како си се осећао/ла када си то видео/ла? • Да ли мислиш да би требало да буде више знаковног језика на телевизији или у школи? • Где би волео/ла да видиш више знаковног језика?	**Main Question 5:** *Have you ever seen sign language on television, at school, or in other places?* **Sub-questions:** • *How did you feel when you saw that?* • *Do you think there should be more sign language on television or in school?* • *Where would you like to see more sign language?*	**Главно питање 4:** Како се осећате поводом ступања на снагу Закона о употреби знаковног језика 2015. године? **Подпитања:** • Да ли је признавање СЗЈ променило нешто у вашем свакодневном животу? • Мислите ли да је признање значајно или се чини више симболичним? • Можете ли дати пример како се СЗЈ подржава (или не подржава) у јавним просторима?	**Main Question 4:** *How do you feel about the entry into force of the Law on the Use of Sign Language in 2015?* **Sub-questions:** • *Has the recognition of SSL changed anything in your daily life?* • *Do you think the recognition is meaningful or does it seem more symbolic?* • *Can you give an example of how SSL is supported (or not supported) in public spaces?*

Thematic Domain	Group 1: Children (7–18 yrs)		Group 2: Adults (19+ yrs)	
Domain 5: Institutional, School & Policy Support	**Главно питање 6:** Да ли школа и друга места помажу Глувим људима да користе знаковни језик? **Подпитања:** • Да ли у школи има наставника или тумача који знају знаковни језик? • Да ли је лако добити помоћ када разговараш са чујућим људима? • Шта би помогло да буде лакше Глувој деци?	**Main Question 6:** *Do school and other places help Deaf people use sign language?* **Sub-questions:** • *Are there teachers or interpreters at school who know sign language?* • *Is it easy to get help when you talk to hearing people?* • *What would help make things easier for Deaf children?*	**Главно питање 5:** Да ли сматрате да државне политике подржавају коришћење СЗЈ у јавном животу? Зашто или зашто не? **Подпитања:** • Да ли сте приметили промене у приступачности (преводиоци, правна права, образовање, јавне услуге)? • Који изазови и даље постоје када користите СЗЈ у свакодневним ситуацијама? • Када бисте могли да предложите једну промену у политикама везаним за СЗЈ, која би то била?	**Main Question 5:** *Do you consider state policies to support the use of SSL in public life? Why or why not?* **Sub-questions:** • *Have you noticed changes in accessibility (interpreters, legal rights, education, public services)?* • *What challenges still exist when you use SSL in everyday situations?* • *If you could propose one change in policies related to SSL, what would it be?*
Domain 6: Communication Barriers with Hearing Population	**Главно питање 7:** Да ли је лако или тешко разговарати са чујућим људима? **Подпитања:** • У којим ситуацијама је комуникација најтежа? • Како чујући људи реагују када виде да користиш знаковни језик? • Шта помаже да се боље разумете?	**Main Question 7:** *Is it easy or difficult to talk to hearing people?* **Sub-questions:** • *In which situations is communication hardest?* • *How do hearing people react when they see you using sign language?* • *What helps you understand each other better?*	**Главно питање 6:** Колико често се суочавате са препрекама у комуникацији када комуницирате са чујућим особама? **Подпитања:** • Које су најчешће ситуације у којима је комуникација тешка? • Како чујући људи обично реагују када схвате да користите СЗЈ? • Да ли сте приметили нека побољшања током година?	**Main Question 6:** *How often do you face communication barriers when communicating with hearing individuals?* **Sub-questions:** • *What are the most common situations in which communication is difficult?* • *How do hearing people usually react when they realize you are using SSL?* • *Have you noticed any improvements over the years?*

Thematic Domain	Group 1: Children (7–18 yrs)		Group 2: Adults (19+ yrs)	
Domain 7: Future Perspectives, Media Representation & Inclusion	**Главно питање 8:** Шта би волео/ла да се промени у будућности за Глуве људе и знаковни језик? **Подпитања:** • Да ли би било добро да више људи научи знаковни језик? • Да ли би требало да има више тумача? • Шта би учинило живот лакшим за Глуву децу?	**Main Question 8:** *What would you like to see change in the future for Deaf people and sign language?* **Sub-questions:** • *Would it be good if more people learned sign language?* • *Should there be more interpreters?* • *What would make life easier for Deaf children?*	**Главно питање 7:** Како се осећате када видите представљање СЈ у медијима или јавним просторима? **Подпитања:** • Мислите ли да је СЈ представљен на начин који је поштован и тачан? • Које промене бисте волели да видите у начину на који се СЈ приказује чујућима?	**Main Question 7:** *How do you feel when you see the representation of SSL in media or public spaces?* **Sub-questions:** • *Do you think SSL is represented in a way that is respectful and accurate?* • *What changes would you like to see in how SSL is displayed to hearing people?*

SECTION B: Analytical Matrix Mapping Field Instruments to Research Hypotheses

This matrix aligns the empirical data collection instruments - qualitative interview guides across age cohorts and the hearing population pilot survey items - strictly across the three core research hypotheses of the PhD dissertation.

Hypothesis	Mapped Qualitative Interview Questions	Mapped Quantitative Survey Variables
Hypothesis 1: Recognition of SSL & Identity	**Children Guide**: Q1 (Learning SSL & family usage), Q2 (Feelings & comfort when signing), Q5 (Sign language visibility in society/TV/school) **Adult Guide**: Q1 (Early acquisition & transition to SSL), Q2 (SSL shaping sense of identity), Q4 (Impact & symbolic vs. substantive value of 2015 SSL Law), Q7 (Representation of SSL in media and public spaces)	**Hearing Pilot Survey**: Q5–Q9 (Awareness of legal status, public visibility, self-rated SSL knowledge, promotion channels)
Hypothesis 2: Accessibility, Resources & Institutional Support	**Children Guide**: Q6 (School support, teacher/interpreter availability, needed help for Deaf children), Q8 (Future perspectives on interpreters and structural support) **Adult Guide**: Q5 (State policies, interpreter availability, legal rights, accessibility challenges in public services/education, proposed policy changes)	**Hearing Pilot Survey**: Q14–Q16 (Support for interpreter funding, non-news interpreted broadcasts, mandatory workplace interpreters)
Hypothesis 3: Hearing Attitudes & Policy Effectiveness	**Children Guide**: Q3 (In-group peer interaction, sign variations, hearing people learning sign), Q7 (Communication barriers with hearing people, difficult situations, hearing reactions) **Adult Guide**: Q3 (In-group acceptance, sign proficiency variations, pressure to use spoken Serbian, hearing people learning SSL), Q6 (Frequency and contexts of communication barriers with hearing individuals, hearing reactions, long-term improvements)	**Hearing Pilot Survey**: Q10–Q13 & Q17 (Curriculum inclusion, gesture comfort, discrimination perception, inclusion suggestions, course interest)

SECTION C: Standalone Pilot Questionnaire for the Hearing Population

This section presents the pilot questionnaire designed for hearing respondents. Its primary objective is to assess hearing individuals' attitudes, awareness, and perceptions regarding SSL and the Deaf community in Serbia.

Одељак 1: Свест о српском знаковном језику	Section 1: Awareness of Serbian Sign Language
Питање 1: **Да ли лично познајете неку Глуву особу?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 1:** **Do you personally know any Deaf person?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 2: **Да ли сте икада видели српски знаковни језик у јавним просторима?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 2:** **Have you ever seen Serbian Sign Language in public spaces?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 3: **Да ли знате да је српски знаковни језик званично признат у Србији?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 3:** **Are you aware that Serbian Sign Language is officially recognized in Serbia?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 4: **Да ли сте икада имали прилику да учите или да будете изложени српском знаковном језику?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 4:** **Have you ever had the opportunity to learn or be exposed to Serbian Sign Language?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 5: **Ако је одговор ДА, где сте имали могућност да учите или да будете изложени српском знаковном језику?** (Отворено питање)	**Question 5:** **If YES, where did you have the opportunity to learn or be exposed to Serbian Sign Language?** (Open-ended question)
Питање 6: **Да ли мислите да би српски знаковни језик требало више да се промовише?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 6:** **Do you think Serbian Sign Language should be promoted more?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

Питање 7: **Где мислите да би српски знаковни језик требало више да се промовише? (Можете означити више одговора.)** ☐ Школе ☐ Јавна телевизија ☐ Државне институције ☐ Друштвене мреже ☐ Радна места ☐ Друго (_____)	**Question 7:** **Where do you think Serbian Sign Language should be promoted more? (You can check multiple answers.)** ☐ Schools ☐ Public television ☐ State institutions ☐ Social media ☐ Workplaces ☐ Other (_____)
Питање 8: **Како бисте оценили своју информисаност о српском знаковном језику? (1 = Немам никакво знање, 5 = Веома добро сам упућен/а)** ☐ 1 (Немам никакво знање) ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 (Веома добро сам упућен/а)	**Question 8:** **How would you rate your level of awareness of Serbian Sign Language? (1 = No awareness at all, 5 = Very well aware)** ☐ 1 (No awareness at all) ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 (Very well aware)
Одељак 2: Ставови према заједници Глувих	**Section 2: Attitudes Towards the Deaf Community**
Питање 9: **Да ли сматрате да би основно учење српског знаковног језика требало да буде део школског програма?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 9:** **Do you believe basic Serbian Sign Language instruction should be part of the school curriculum?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 10: **Колико бисте се осећали пријатно у комуникацији са Глувом особом користећи гестове или писани текст? (1 = Веома непријатно, 5 = Веома пријатно)** ☐ 1 (Веома непријатно) ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 (Веома пријатно)	**Question 10:** **How comfortable would you feel communicating with a Deaf person using gestures or written text? (1 = Very uncomfortable, 5 = Very comfortable)** ☐ 1 (Very uncomfortable) ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 (Very comfortable)
Питање 11: **Да ли верујете да се корисници српског знаковног језика суочавају са дискриминацијом у Србији?** ☐ Да ☐ Не ☐ Нисам сигуран/на	**Question 11:** **Do you believe Serbian Sign Language users face discrimination in Serbia?** ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Питање 12: **По Вашем мишљењу, како би друштво могло бити инклузивније према заједници Глувих?** (Отворено питање)	**Question 12:** **In your opinion, how could society be more inclusive toward the Deaf community?** (Open-ended question)
Одељак 3: Политика и интеграција	**Section 3: Policy and Integration**
Питање 13: **Да ли бисте подржали повећано финансирање државних преводилачких услуга за српски знаковни језик?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 13:** **Would you support increased state funding for Serbian Sign Language translation/interpreting services?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 14: **Да ли сте икада видели јавни догађај или телевизијски програм са тумачењем на српски знаковни језик осим вести?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 14:** **Have you ever seen a public event or TV program with Serbian Sign Language interpretation other than the news?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 15: **Да ли мислите да би компаније требало да буду обавезне да обезбеде тумачење српског знаковног језика за Глуве запослене?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 15:** **Do you think companies should be required to provide Serbian Sign Language interpretation for Deaf employees?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Питање 16: **Да ли бисте били заинтересовани за кратки уводни курс српског знаковног језика?** ☐ Да ☐ Не	**Question 16:** **Would you be interested in taking a short introductory Serbian Sign Language course?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
Одељак 4: Демографски подаци	**Section 4: Demographic Data**
Питање 17: **Које сте старосне доби?** ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56+	**Question 17:** **What age group do you belong to?** ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56+
Питање 18: **Који је ваш пол?** ☐ Мушки ☐ Женски ☐ Друго ☐ Не желим да се изјасним	**Question 18:** **What is your gender?** ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to answer

Питање 19: **Место рођења:** (Отворено питање)	**Question 19:** **Place of birth:** (Open-ended question)
Питање 20: **Место становања: (**Отворено питање)	**Question 20:** **Place of residence:** (Open-ended question)
Питање 21: **Последњи стечени степен стручне спреме:** ☐ Нулти степен – Без завршеног основног образовања ☐ I степен – Основна школа ☐ II степен – Стручно оспособљавање ☐ III степен – Трогодишња средња школа ☐ IV степен – Четворогодишња средња школа ☐ V степен – Специјалистичке студије ☐ VI степен – Основне академске студије ☐ VII степен – Мастер/магистарске/специјалистичке студије ☐ VIII степен – Докторске студије	**Question 21:** **Highest level of education attained:** ☐ Level 0 – No completed education ☐ Level I – Primary school ☐ Level II – Vocational training ☐ Level III – Three-year secondary education ☐ Level IV – Four-year secondary education ☐ Level V – Specialist studies ☐ Level VI – Bachelor's degree ☐ Level VII – Master's/Magister/Specialist studies ☐ Level VIII – Doctoral (PhD) studies

10. AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Ana D. Jovanović was born in 1996 in Čačak, Serbia, where she completed her primary and secondary education before enrolling at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. She received her BA in English Language and Literature in 2019 and went on to complete her MA in Conference, Specialized, and Audiovisual Translation in 2021 at the same institution, defending a master's thesis entitled *Sign Language Interpreting on Television*. In the same year, she enrolled in the PhD program at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

During her master's studies, she served as Assistant Coordinator of the MA program she attended, contributing to the organization of teaching activities, cooperation with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Interpretation, the coordination of practical interpreting exercises, and program promotion.

She is a court-certified interpreter for the English language. Her academic profile is further defined by her research interests in conference interpreting, as well as sign language studies, with particular emphasis on sociolinguistics and language identity, which constitute the core focus of her doctoral research.

Прилог 1.

Изјава о ауторству

Име и презиме аутора Ана Д. Јовановић

Број индекса 2021/30043

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Име и презиме аутора: Ана Д. Јовановић

Број индекса: 2021/30043

Студијски програм: Језик, књижевност и култура

Наслов рада: The Silent Dialogue: Exploring Language Identity and Language Policy and Planning in the Serbian Sign Language Community (Нечујни дијалог: Истраживање језичког идентитета и језичке политике и планирања у заједници која се служи знаковним језиком у Србији)

Ментор: проф. др Јелена Филиповић, редовна професорка

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Потпис аутора

У Београду, _____ _____

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