VISUAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH SIGN LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY ON THE FIRST ARTICLE OF THE CREED *IN ROMANIAN SIGN LANGUAGE*[1]

Abstract: *In this paper we provide grammatical information which supports the visual communication specific to deaf people and the corresponding translation from Romanian language into Romanian Sign Language (RSL) of the first article in* The Creed. *The theories that we propose and sustain are backed up by some relevant photos. The main purpose of our endeavour is to highlight the fact that there is a great difference between Signed Romanian Language (the word-for-word translation of Romanian into the deaf people's language) and Romanian Sign Language, the native language of deaf people, which does not literally observe the grammatical rules of Romanian language. All this are to be applied in the first article of* The Creed.

Key words*: sign language communication, Romanian Sign Language (RSL), the Creed*

The present article deals primarily with the communication process that involves deaf people in a religious-liturgical context revolving around one of the most representative statements belonging to the orthodox tradition, namely, *The Creed,* which has been translated into Romanian Sign Language (RSL), in accordance with grammatical rules specific to this type of non-verbal, visual communication.

The first article of *The Creed* in RSL is mainly a translation of the text from Romanian language into Romanian liturgical sign language. Further on, we will consider a carefully detailed analysis that is supported by linguistic and theological arguments.

First of all, allow us to provide some preliminary information about the communication via sign language. This type of communication is used primarily by hearing-impaired people, by means of their hands, face, and eyes, rather than their vocal tract or ears. Mention should be made that this language is not derived from spoken language, as some deaf-"friendly" critics might consider, and there is a clear distinction between *signed* language and *sign* language, the latter being representative for the natural way of communicating specific to the deaf people, whereas signed language is just a word-for-word transposition of signs into the grammar of spoken language, irrespective of the rules and logic governing deaf people's communication.

Notwithstanding the common widespread opinion that sign language is not a language *per se,* we will offer some exact information about the RSL structure in accordance with the theory sustained by an influential scholar in the field, William Stokoe, by means of five parameters: shape of the hand, place of articulation (location), movement, palm orientation (region of the hand contacting the body, orientation of the hand to body, orientation of hands to each other) and facial expressions. Also, the RSL grammar system has basic components such as phonology, morphology and syntax, which will be pinpointed in the description, analysis and argumentation of our case study.

Dealing with the first article of *The Creed*, our paper was not intended to be only a translation, but also a teaching material supported by grammatical and theological arguments. For this reason we consider it to be necessary and useful to the teachers employed in special schools for non-hearing people, to the priests in parishes

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for deaf people and to the deaf people themselves, in general. The first article that stands as our focus belongs to the Creed presented in the Foundations of the Orthodox Christian Faith (*Învățătura de credință creştină ortodoxă*) and we can say that is accessible both to the hearing and to the non-hearing reader.

The material that will be presented in this paper is proof to the fact that RSL is "a language on its own", "the mother tongue of the deaf people", and it is designed to be significantly useful to those who want to study sign language and are willing to understand the silent world of the non-hearing people. As we are very familiar with RSL, Romanian Language and the analysis of religious texts, we believe that this material will succeed in revealing the deaf believers the mysteries of faith and in being helpful so that the secrets of our religion could be accessible to them.

Unfortunately, in the Romanian educational system for deaf persons, there are no standard or academic techniques that might lead to a normative grammar specific to this language. For this reason, our paper strives to pinpoint at least some of the basic rules that the users of RSL (be they native or non-native users of sign language) could rely on and make reference to when expressing information or addressing prayers in sign language.

The means through which we have translated the first article from the symbol of faith stand for a synthesis of the specific language knowledge we have acquired from the two cultures – Romanian and the one belonging to the Romanian Deaf Community. Romanian language displays proper formal characteristics, for instance morphological, but most of all syntactic and lexical, which, when being translated into another language can be converted only approximately. In most of the cases, the results of translation feature either elements imbued with the characteristics of the source language or elements and relations that try to remain faithful to the meaning that is rendered, thus disregarding the representative forms, structures and rules of the source language (Bell, R.T., 2000: 7). In its turn, the target language imposes formal and content constraints, given by its own features and cases of use. Due to this complex underlying web of causes involved in the translation process, there are two main possibilities: the source language oriented translation or the target language oriented one.

The Romanian simple sentence made up of Subject and Predicate/Verb with the respective word order, will be translated into RSL so as to transmit and express a core meaning, and there are cases when a two-word sentence turns out as a one-sign sentence in RSL, since, as we have already mentioned, meaning is the main goal in sign language communication. Antoine Berman considers that every culture – and if we were to extrapolate, every language – is self sufficient, autonomous, and tends to attach to itself other cultures and languages. Consequently, the culture/language proposes an act of translation based not on subordinating the foreign culture/language by the receiving language, but on an equalitarian relation between the foreign language and the native one (Berman, A., 1984: 23.). On the other hand, Ioan Kohn asserts that the exact translation means the recreation of the original with the observance of the norms held by the receiving language in the style of the great writers and of the rich tradition of a national literature (Kohn, I., 1983: 96.).

In the translation process, we have approached alternatively literary translation and literal translation. Given the fact that Romanian deaf people are not *exposed* to learning sign language in a scientific/scholastic/educational environment[1], and thus do

[1] Their only way of learning sign language is via personal interaction with other deaf people.

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not have an extended possibility of conceptualizing notions, literary translation had to be brought forth, since our main priority was to render the meaning.

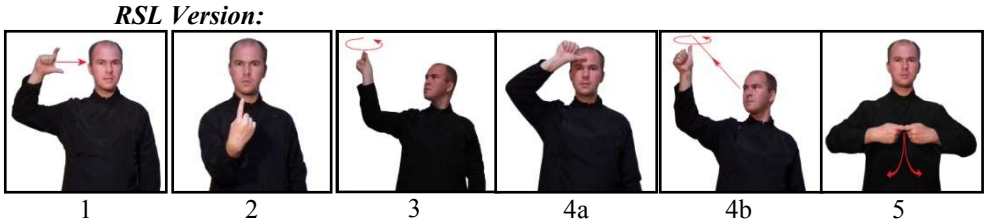
As far as the deaf people are concerned, the Romanian text analysis presents difficulties in approach, since they write and read by first translating the message, mentally, from Romanian. Also, the morpho-syntactical analysis is problematic. Thus, if in Romanian prepositions and conjunctions can switch roles depending on the context, in RSL their use, when they lack in meaning, creates non-sense and might block the communication act.

We shall present the technicalities of the first article dealing with the Holy Trinity, in Romanian, English and RSL.

Romanian Version*: Cred întru Unul Dumnezeu, Tatăl Atotţiitorul, Făcătorul cerului şi al pământului, al tuturor celor văzute şi nevăzute.*

English Version*: I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible*

RSL Version:

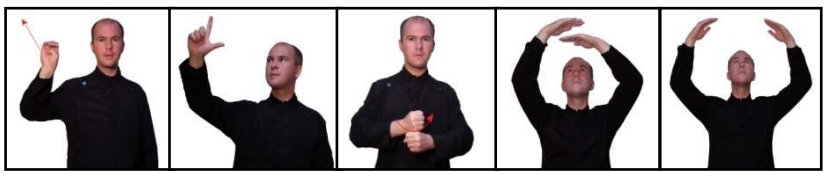


1 2 3 4a 4b 5



[p]

6a 6b 6c



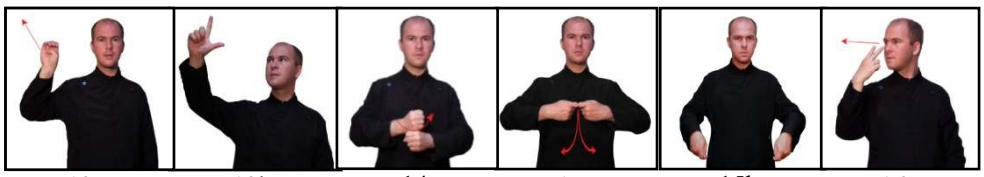
[p]

7a 7b 8 9a 9b



[p]

10a 10b 11 12a 12b



13a 13b 14 15a 15b 16a

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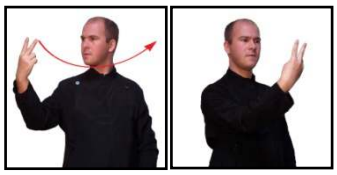
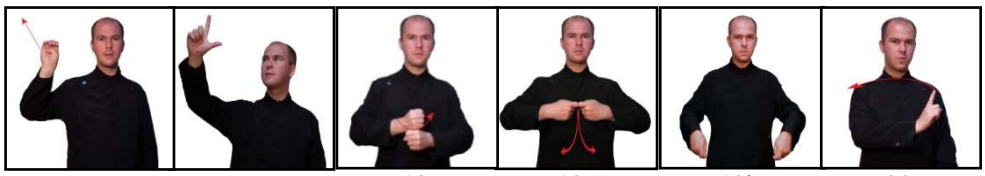
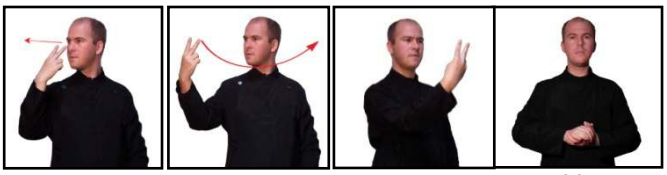


[p]

16b 16c



17a 17b 18 19a 19b 20



21 a 21b 21c 22

CRED$_1$ UNUL$_2$ DUMNEZEU$_3$ TATĂL$_{4a+4b}$ ATOTȚIITORUL$_{5+6a+6b+6c}$ *[p]*
EL$_{7a+7b}$ FĂCĂTORUL$_8$ CERULUI$_{9a+9b}$ *[p]*
EL$_{10a+10b}$ FĂCĂTORUL$_{11}$ PĂMÂNTULUI$_{12a+12b}$ *[p]*
EL$_{13a+13b}$ FĂCĂTORUL$_{14}$ TOATE$_{15a+15b}$ VĂZUTE$_{16a+16b+16c}$ *[p]*
EL$_{17a+17b}$ FĂCĂTORUL$_{18}$ TOATE$_{19a+19b}$ NEVĂZUTE$_{20+21a+21b+21c}$ *[pp]*$_{22}$

Next, we will present the morpho-syntactical analysis, argumentation and execution for some of the most challenging and revealing units from the Creed fragment under discussion, namely: CRED / BELIEVE, UNUL/ ONE, DUMNEZEU/ GOD, and TATĂL/ THE FATHER.

CRED / BELIEVE



A Morpho-Syntactical Analysis, Argumentation, and Sign Execution

EU CRED (I Believe) is considered the nucleus of communication expressing true faith springing from the believers' hearts. The sign ***cred/believe*** renders the verb *a crede/ to believe* in the first person singular, a case in which there is no need for the signer to perform the sign designating the personal pronoun for the respective person and respective subject (*eu/I*). The lack of this personal pronoun in the symbol of faith[1]

[1] An elliptical expression agreed upon by the Hoy Fathers at the First Synod of Nicaea in 325 and the one of Constantinople, in 381.

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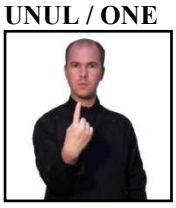
echoes the RSL system of communication, given the fact that expressing RSL personal pronouns discharging the function of subjects or direct objects is replaced by directionality, namely the verb standing as a predicate in the sentence is directed towards the signer or to the person/thing to whom/which it addresses. In our case the sign *cred/believe* follows a movement towards the signer, according to the arrow in the photo above.

The present sign stands for a voluntary action performed by the faithful deaf, in the course of which the C-configured right hand, with the arm extended, assumes the Church knowledge and its acquiring, by means of the hand movement towards the right temple, an intermediary access point for personal cognitive mechanisms. The C hand shape also represents the manner through which the deaf person, consciously, learns/ acquires the teachings of the Church. The right C-shaped hand holds an active function and is bent from the elbow laterally, at the head's level.

UNUL / ONE



A Morpho-Syntactical Analysis, Argumentation, and Sign Execution

The sign corresponding to the numeral *unu/one* firmly, clearly, and undoubtedly expresses the uniqueness, singularity we suggest and support by signing with the index of the right hand. Within liturgical sign language this sign means the stressing of God's singularity and uniqueness, as the supreme ultimate truth. The sign is performed by indicating the numeral *unu/one* with the right hand, folded from the elbow, so as the arm and the forearm mirror a V-letter. The index points upwards, while the other fingers are closely held in the fist.

DUMNEZEU / GOD



A Morpho-Syntactical Analysis, Argumentation, and Sign Execution

Dumnezeu/God is a proper noun in the Accusative case, preceded in Romanian by the preposition *întru/ in*, discharging the syntactical function of prepositional object. The previously mentioned preposition will not be signed in RSL since its presence in the communication act might distort the sending to and the reception of the message by a deaf person.

The counter clockwise hand movement has been brought into focus due to the fact that we understand God's eternity as being brought here and now. The

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configuration of the right hand resembling the canonical performance of the holy cross, God's Trinitarian aspect, is assimilated to *God*'s hand, "the Lord's right hand is lifted high" (Psalms 118, 18). The three fingers – the thumb, index and middle fingers – representing the Heavens, the other two, firmly united and touching the interior palm, standing for the Earth, visually and strongly support the consistency of the statement put forth by the signer who confesses his/her faith. The circular movement leads us to the wide meaning of cycle, permanence and eternity. The signer's position should be solemn and convincing since this attitude is specific to the communication and confession of the Gospel. The hand, holding the fingers in the previously described configuration, is placed in the right lateral side of one's head, where it describes a circular counter clockwise movement.

TATĂL/ THE FATHER



A Morpho-Syntactical Analysis, Argumentation, and Sign Execution

In Romanian, the word *Dumnezeu/ God* is the object of the verb *a crede/ to believe* and is followed by the post-modifiers *Tatăl Atotţiitorul, Făcătorul cerului şi al pământului, al tuturor celor văzute şi nevăzute/ the Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible*, which enumerates God's attributes. In support of our analysis, Bartolomeu Anania states that when one says *Tatăl nostru care eşti în Ceruri/ Our Father who are in Heaven,* the syntagm does not point to the relationship *Tatăl ceresc – Tatăl pământesc/ Heavenly Father – Earthly Father*, but to God's determination, in His transcendence – immanence (Anania, B., 2001: 620).

The issue in RSL with identifying and performing a sign designating the representation of *the unrepresentable, Dumnezeu-Tatăl/ God the Father* has been a real challenge since the lay sign belonging to the common/ colloquial RSL was the same for the word *tată/ father* (without capital letters, as in the case of God the Father) and for the town of Pitesti, namely, the iconic twisting of the moustache with the thumb and the index finger, in the corner of the mouth. Since RSL has been acknowledged as a pastoral method in the Romanian Orthodox Church, and implicitly there appeared a need for the creation of a liturgical RSL as opposed to the lay RSL, we have researched the matter under discussion and we have come up with a suitable RSL variant for the biblical/religious/liturgical concept *Dumnezeu Tatăl/ God the Father.*

Referring back to the act of marking our body with the Holy Cross and obviously with the Holy Trinity, we have remembered the union of the right hand's three fingers considered in the sign *Dumnezeu/ God.* In addition, from the Church tradition we know that the thumb is metaphorically allotted to God the Father. In the present context of the sign under scrutiny, the hand configuration described as follows, the thumb is extended while the rest of the right hand fingers are held in the fist, is identified with the RSL hand shape A, which resembles the Greek letter *alpha*, designating the beginning. We also know that when we start signing our body with the Holy Cross and touching our forehead, we utter *În numele Tatălui/ In the name of the Father*. These two sequences

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identified in the Church tradition followed by a rising movement above the signer's head, stressing the celestial level of the concept, results in the RSL sign for *Father*.

In point of execution we can describe it as such: initially, in the performance of the sign, the A-shaped right hand touches with its thumb the forehead's middle section. Then, it will follow an upward movement towards the exterior right side of one's body, circularly, on the horizontal and counter clockwise.

Conclusion

All in all, in this paper we have provided grammatical information supporting the visual communication specific to Romanian deaf people, which has been applied on the first article of *The Creed*. The theories that we have sustained are backed up by some relevant photos and grammatical argumentation specific to the RSL culture and system of communication. Our main purpose being to highlight RSL as Romanian deaf people's native language, we would like to think that we have deconstructed some myths concerning them and their personal way of communication.

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