

## 2020: A New Era of Sign Language Literature

### 2020: Um nova Era para Linguagem de sinais na Literatura

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**Summary:** Sign language is the primary daily language of many Deaf people, yet sign language is not always included as a part of Deaf Education. Teachers of the Deaf in France in the late 1700s and early 1800s established using sign language in the classroom and yet generations later educators chose to revert back to oralism, not including any sign language when teaching Deaf children. And the trend continues to this day. Researchers in the 1960s, 70s and 80s proved that sign languages are natural languages, and yet this fact did not change the difficulties schools still have in reassuring parents and administrators that the Deaf students will learn to communicate, read and write a sign language as with your fellow listeners regarding oral languages that speak. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century most educators and researchers are aware that sign languages are sophisticated languages with grammar, syntax and large vocabularies. Yet accepting sign languages as written languages has taken longer. Those who support the idea of writing sign languages feel that the availability of written literature and poetry in sign languages will lead to improved literacy in oral languages and in the long run, increase acceptance by the hearing world. Showing that sign languages have a written form helps establish sign languages as foreign languages in schools. With the advent of the internet and social media, writing sign languages is spreading quickly. The year 2020 is the beginning of a new era of sign language literature.

**Keywords:** Sign Language; Literature; SignWriting; Deaf; Education.

**Resumo:** As línguas de sinais são o principal meio de comunicação e expressão das comunidades surdas, embora nem sempre elas sejam incluídas como parte da educação dos surdos. Professores de surdos na França, no final dos anos 1700 e início dos anos 1800, tentaram implantar o uso da língua de sinais em sala de aula, porém, nas gerações que se seguiram, a grande maioria dos educadores optou por retornar ao oralismo, sem incluir nenhuma língua de sinais no processo

<sup>1</sup> Valerie Sutton is the original inventor of Sutton Movement Writing and SignWriting. This written system is used by thousands of people on a daily basis in over 40 countries. In general, it has been adopting to Deaf Education, to teach literacy, and to preserve the rich cultural Sign Language heritage of Deaf communities worldwide. Valerie founded the Center for Sutton Movement Writing that sponsors Sutton SignWriting and Sutton DanceWriting. The Center for Sutton Movement Writing is a USA non-profit, educational organization founded in California in 1974. Directed by Valerie Sutton, the Center collects funds for publishing SignWriting, a way to read and write any sign language in the world. For more information, see: <https://www.signwriting.org/about/web/>.

de ensino e aprendizagem estudantes surdos. E essa tendência, infelizmente, continua até hoje. Embora muitos pesquisadores nas décadas de 1960, 70 e 80 tenham provado que as línguas de sinais são de fato línguas naturais, isso não foi suficiente para resolver as dificuldades que as escolas ainda têm para tranquilizar os pais e administradores de que os alunos surdos, através de suas respectivas línguas de sinais, aprenderão a se comunicar, ler e escrever, assim como acontece com os seus colegas ouvintes em relação às línguas orais que falam. Agora, no século XXI, a maioria dos educadores e pesquisadores já sabe que a língua de sinais é uma língua bem estruturada, com gramática, sintaxe e vocabulários amplos. No entanto, aceitar a língua de sinais como uma língua escrita demorou mais tempo. Aqueles que apoiam essa ideia compreendem que a disponibilidade de escrita em língua de sinais levará os estudantes surdos a uma alfabetização mais aprimorada em línguas orais, e, a longo prazo a aceitação da escrita por parte dos ouvintes será muito maior. Mostrar que as línguas de sinais têm uma forma escrita ajuda a estabelecer as línguas de sinais como línguas estrangeiras nas escolas. Com o advento da internet e das mídias sociais, o sistema de escrita de línguas de sinais vem se espalhando muito rapidamente. O ano de 2020 é o início de uma nova era da literatura em línguas de sinais.

**Palavras-chave:** Língua de Sinais; Literatura; SignWriting; Surdo; Educação.

## INTRODUCTION

For those who do not use a sign language as a daily primary language, sign languages can seem foreign and even baffling. Many assume that language must be spoken, using sound, to be a true language. This assumption has come and gone and reared its head again and again with or without research and proof that real languages can indeed exist without sound or using the voice box. The concept that language can be conveyed through sign language is a not a new idea, but in every generation sign language users face skeptics in the non-sign language world and oftentimes have to repeat and repeat explanations that their sign language is a good language too. Or maybe they don't try to explain it, but instead live their lives isolated from those who do not understand. There are so many stories of people's lives influenced by the reactions of the culture around them, and even though these stories are written down and told, not everyone realizes. It is easier to educate a child so the parents and administrators are happy, even if this means that the education of the child falls short because those around the child did not make the effort to learn sign language.

Meanwhile, new generations of researchers produce pioneering ideas in sign language education and linguistics. These fine researchers and educators brave new worlds.

They must have a strong sense of mission, because oftentimes societies do not accept their findings immediately. Every generation seems to be required to repeat or reinforce the previous generation’s findings, and oftentimes what seemed to become proven in a previous generation, was discarded and seemingly forgotten by the next generation.

An example of this pattern in Deaf Education is the remarkable time in France, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée, and other great teachers, established sign languages as an important part of Deaf Education. See Figure 1.

Charles-Michel de l'Épée

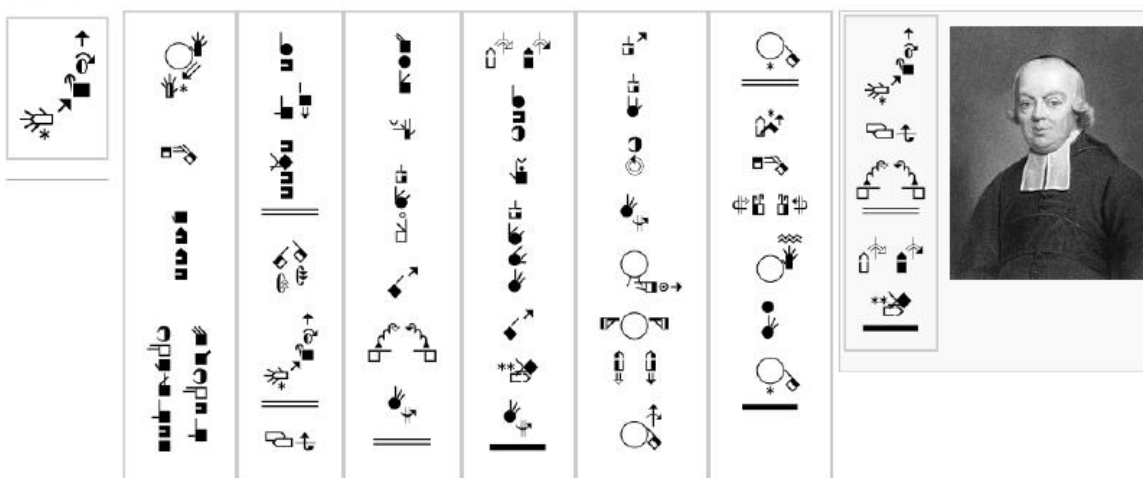


Figure 1: Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée. Excerpt from the ASL Wikipedia article written in American Sign Language (ASL) by Adam Frost.

Other educators from other countries learned from the French Deaf Education system and established schools for the Deaf in their own countries, using sign languages. Later, the trend reversed and sign languages were oftentimes replaced with oral training once again.

The waxing and waning of the use of sign languages in Deaf Education has continued throughout history and to this day there are places that do not allow Deaf people to use sign language, but instead require lip reading or “oralism”.

## WRITING SIGN LANGUAGES

During this time in France, in the early 1800's, when sign languages were being used in Deaf Education, there was a pioneering researcher and teacher of Deaf students, Roch-Ambroise Auguste Bébien. Bébien was one of the first hearing educators fluent in French Sign Language. In 1825, he wrote an important book "Mimographie", which shows a method of writing signs which he developed. Bébien felt strongly for the need for a writing system for signs. He pioneered this new field of research for those who came after him. It is documented that Bébien fought to establish sign languages as written languages and it was a difficult struggle. See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Roch-Ambroise Auguste Bébien  
 photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century most educators and researchers are aware that sign languages are sophisticated languages with grammar, syntax and large vocabularies. And in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing and expanding into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, written sign languages established a firmer foundation, providing reading literature in written sign languages in American Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language, Flemish Sign Language, French Sign Language, French-Belgian Sign Language, French-Swiss Sign Language, German Sign Language, German-Swiss Sign Language, Nicaraguan Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, Polish Sign Language, Portuguese Sign Language, Spanish Sign Language, Tunisian Sign Language... around 40 sign languages now provide some written sign language literature for signers to read on a daily basis. See Figure 3.



Figure 3: Countries providing written sign language literature in 2010.

Map by Bill Reese, courtesy of SignWriting.org.

## FEAR OF CHANGE

The spread of written sign language literature in the 2000s, read daily and written by sign language users themselves, was stimulated with the invention of Sutton SignWriting in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1974. Although first invented by Valerie Sutton at the University of Copenhagen, the SignWriting system soon was used and influenced by

signers in over 40 countries. This worldwide group effort on the internet lead to a writing system that is really used by signers themselves, and is not necessarily a part of any research lab. SignWriting is used in multiple countries because it is free on the internet. Any individual or groups of students can write with the system, use the software, and can contribute to a world of written sign language literature, without restrictions, free of the confines of fear, that met new ideas in the past.

Fear of change and resistance by some, who were worried that the hearing world, or those who feel only spoken languages should be written, would be against them writing their own language, held the writing system back, before the internet. But the internet and freedom of thought, plus no financial cost to any SignWriting user, changed everything.

But looking back, in the 1960's, 70's and 80's, sign language linguists and researchers shared the daunting task of establishing sign languages as real languages without the internet. Dr. William Stokoe was a key factor in spearheading this research, proving that sign languages are true languages. Thank you, Dr. Stokoe, and to all those who worked as sign language researchers and linguists during those years. See Figure 4.

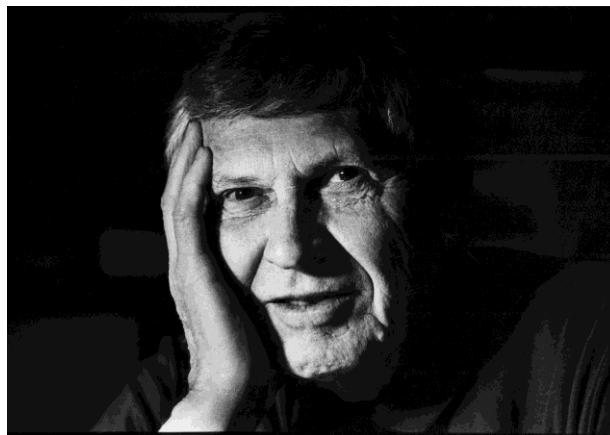


Figure 4: Dr. William Stokoe

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

For educators, it was not easy to change society to think in this new way either. Before that time, most educators viewed sign languages as “lesser languages”. It was thought that spoken languages were superior languages to sign languages, and therefore sign languages should only be used as a last resort. Because of this atmosphere in Deaf

Education, even though Dr. Stokoe and others suggested that sign languages are good languages, sign languages were not the primary languages taught in schools. Many teachers did not know how to sign. The thinking at that time was that people should learn to read and write a spoken language, like English or Portuguese, even if they could not hear those languages. It was feared that if a Deaf person learned to read and write their own native sign language, they would become “lazy” and never choose to learn to read and write a spoken language. And teachers would have to learn sign language to teach the writing of it, too, which was a big hurdle.

Now many realize that reading and writing sign language is actually beneficial in Deaf Education. When a child learns to read and write one language, it opens the windows and doors to learning to read and write another – but be that as it may, there was still large resistance to writing sign languages in 1974 and still some to this day.

Those who support the idea of writing sign languages feel that the availability of written literature and poetry in sign languages will lead to improved literacy in spoken languages and in the long run, increase acceptance by the hearing world. Showing that sign languages have a written form helps establish sign languages as foreign languages in schools, and more schools now accept sign languages as a foreign language elective, along side French, German and other well known spoken languages.

So slowly, the past arguments against writing sign languages are disappearing. What were the old arguments? “Sign languages were not meant to be written languages”. “Our grandparents never wrote sign language, and they did just fine without writing” “Writing is for hearing people” and “If I write sign language with a different script than spoken languages, people will think I am uneducated or illiterate”.

One answer for these comments is to tell a true story about the Cherokee Indian Nation, a North American Indian tribe. In 1821, the Cherokee Indian chief, Sequoyah, invented the Cherokee syllabary, the writing system for the Cherokee Indian language – a spoken language.

When he invented the Cherokee Indian syllabary (alphabet), his own people were at first angry and against writing their language. Their argument against writing was similar to the arguments used against writing sign languages. The Cherokee tribesmen said that “writing is for the white man’s language, but the Cherokee people have not needed to write



before and do not need it now”. So his own Cherokee tribesmen put Sequoyah on trial. During the trial, he was able to prove that he could write a note to his daughter in another place, and she understood what he had written to her. The usefulness of reading and writing a language became evident. The Cherokee Indian syllabary was accepted by his own people and now today, the happy news is the Cherokee Indian Language has been preserved for future generations. Without the writing system, their literature, which was only passed down by word of mouth before, would have been changed and forgotten.

About Sequoyah: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sequoyah> or <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sequoyah> . See Figure 5.



Figure 5: Sequoyah

Illustration courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



There is another aspect to the wonderful story of the written form for the Cherokee Indian Language. Because their stories were published in books, people who are interested in studying the history of the Cherokee Indians can read their books, which can be translated into other spoken languages now. So writing their language brought their people together, provided historical information for historians, taught the world about how indians lived at that time, and preserved a very beautiful language from extinction.

Following that same argument, writing sign languages preserves the beauty and structure of sign languages, providing a study tool for researchers to look at and compare. Writing sign languages gives the world a window – a look – into Deaf Culture. Written sign language lets us explore the literature of Deaf communities around the world, and helps us learn sign languages and compare them. And for native signers, born into families or communities of Deaf people signing from birth, or from early ages, their world is expanded to have a written form for their native language. We all benefit from writing our native language, because we can then compare other languages to ours.

## THE POWER OF WRITTEN SIGN LANGUAGE

Writing sign languages provides Deaf communities with power. The power of education and personal expression. The power of translation between written languages. The power of not being dependent on an interpreter. The power of information, and the power of cross-cultural communication. The power of writing directly in one's own language without translation into another language is profound. It builds one's self esteem to know that one's own language is just as important as another language and is equal in the eyes of the librarians and the legal documents in the world.

Many hearing people do not have contact with the “Deaf Community”. How does one, as an outsider, learn more and communicate better?

Reading literature written by members of the Deaf Community would help. But until recently, there was no written form that was established enough to make it possible for outsiders to learn about Deaf Culture from the writings of the Deaf Culture members themselves.

Even though the SignWriting script has existed for 45 years, as a research tool for linguists, and as a tool for sign language students to remember sign vocabulary, it is just now starting to be used by more people on a daily basis and this is an important milestone. Social media and the internet has helped. These technologies were not available to researchers and teachers in the 1960s, 70s, 80s or 90s, or to Roch-Ambroise Auguste Bébien in France in the 1800s. Imagine if Mr. Bébien could have posted on the internet!

And actually Sutton SignWriting began before the advent of the internet too! The first research project testing its use, was a newspaper written in American Sign Language and Danish Sign Language, called the SignWriter Newspaper, published from 1981 to 1984 and distributed quarterly to 11,000 people. The newspaper served only as an “introduction” to the idea that a newspaper “can be written in sign language”. It created controversy, because most people didn’t think sign languages could or should be written at that time, and many assumed that the idea had died, when the newspaper stopped publication in 1984. But it hadn’t died. It just took a pause. It was too new an idea to have immediate acceptance, but like many new ideas in history, it is now being re-discovered. See Figure 6a.



Figure 6a: The SignWriter Newspaper written in American and Danish Sign Languages in 1981.

Photo courtesy of SignWriting.org

Actually the SignWriter Newspaper, which had 20 tabloid-size pages of SignWriting written by hand with ink pens (it was before the advent of the personal computer in 1984), included articles written by 10 Deaf American Sign Language and Danish Sign Language journalists. The newspaper set the groundwork for future publications in written sign languages. See Figure 6b.



Figure 6b: The SignWriter Newspaper was written by hand with ink pens, before computers.

Photo courtesy of SignWriting.org

Because of the SignWriter Newspaper, which was distributed in Denmark in the early 1980s, teachers of the Deaf in Denmark chose to use SignWriting with their Deaf students. Deaf children learned to read and write Danish Sign Language in the Danish school system from 1982-1988. The results were published in this yellow book. See Figure 7.

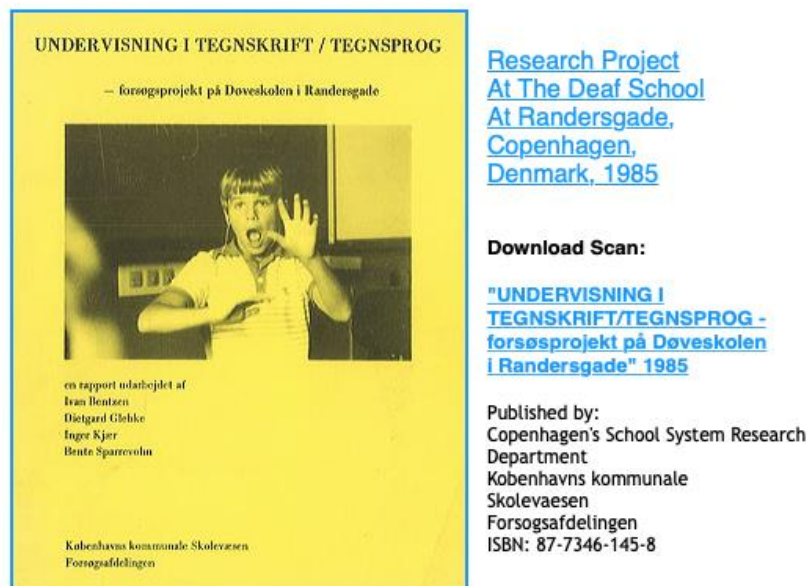


Figure 7: SignWriting in the Danish School System

Now, nearing the year 2020, the SignWriting script has software for writing sign languages online. It is used on Apps on tablets and phones, as well as personal computers.

On computers, SignWriting provides the tools for creating and publishing dictionaries and writing Wikipedias in written sign languages. Wikipedias are now available in American Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language & Tunisian Sign Language. All sign languages are welcome to establish their own Wikipedia. See Figures 8a, 8b, 8c.

By 2030, it is our hope that thick encyclopedias, printed dictionaries, religious literature, children's literature, novels and Wikipedias, with thousands of articles, and full newspapers will be written and available for every sign language user online. Lofty goals, with a bright future.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

On social media and on phone and tablet Apps, messages are being written right now in sign language. At the writing of this article, the written sign language on Facebook is posted as a photo or graphic, but software and Apps are being developed for phones and tablets making it possible to write SignWriting symbols directly on multiple devices.

Writing systems for spoken languages took centuries to be established, and although there is work ahead to establish written sign languages in this new era starting in 2020, the stage is set and Act One, from 1974-2020, is completed and now, as we approach the year 2020 we start Act Two!

Figure 8a: The American Sign Language Wikipedia:

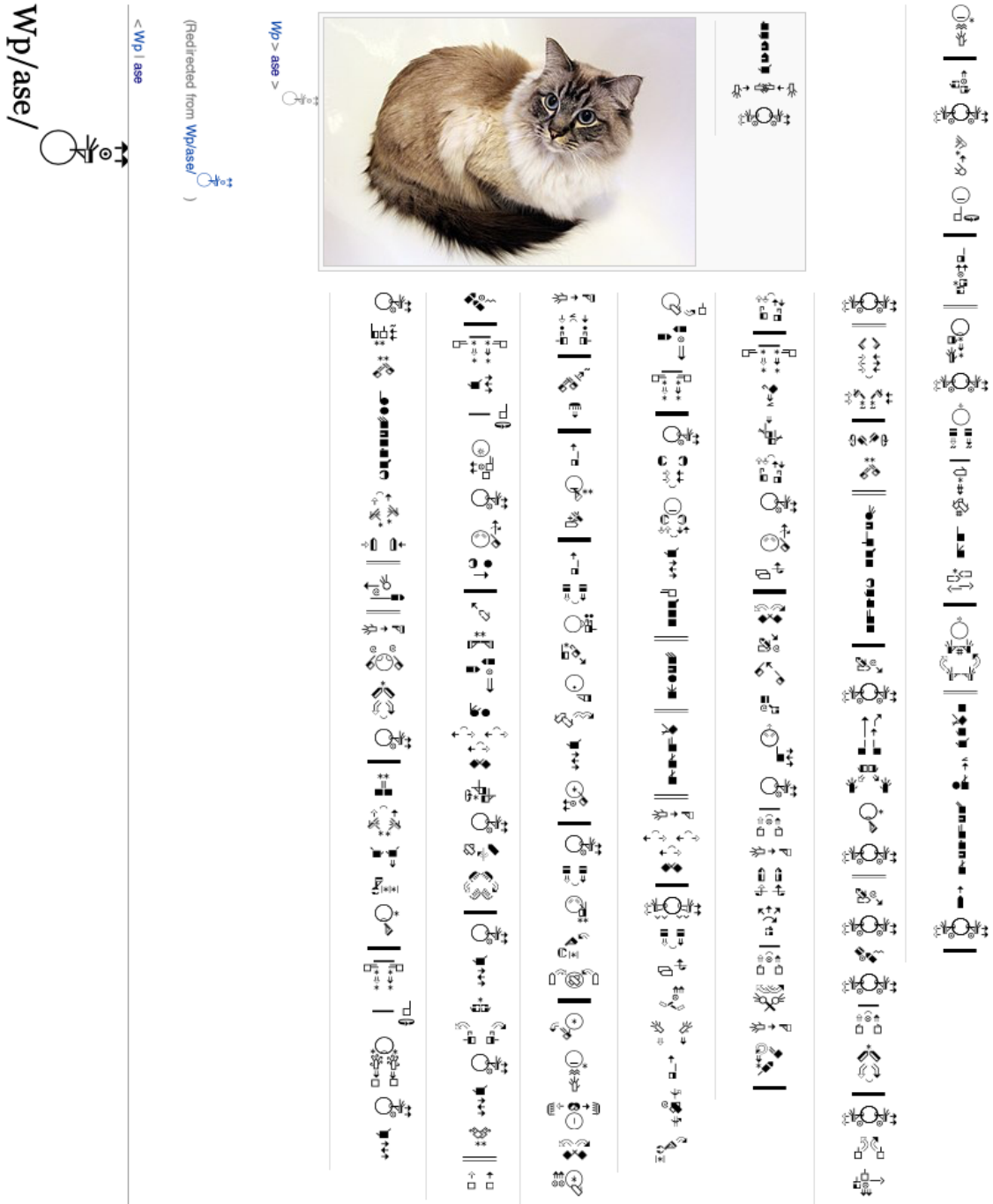


Figure 8a: ASL Wikipedia article about CATS.

Figure 8b: The Tunisian Sign Language Wikipedia:

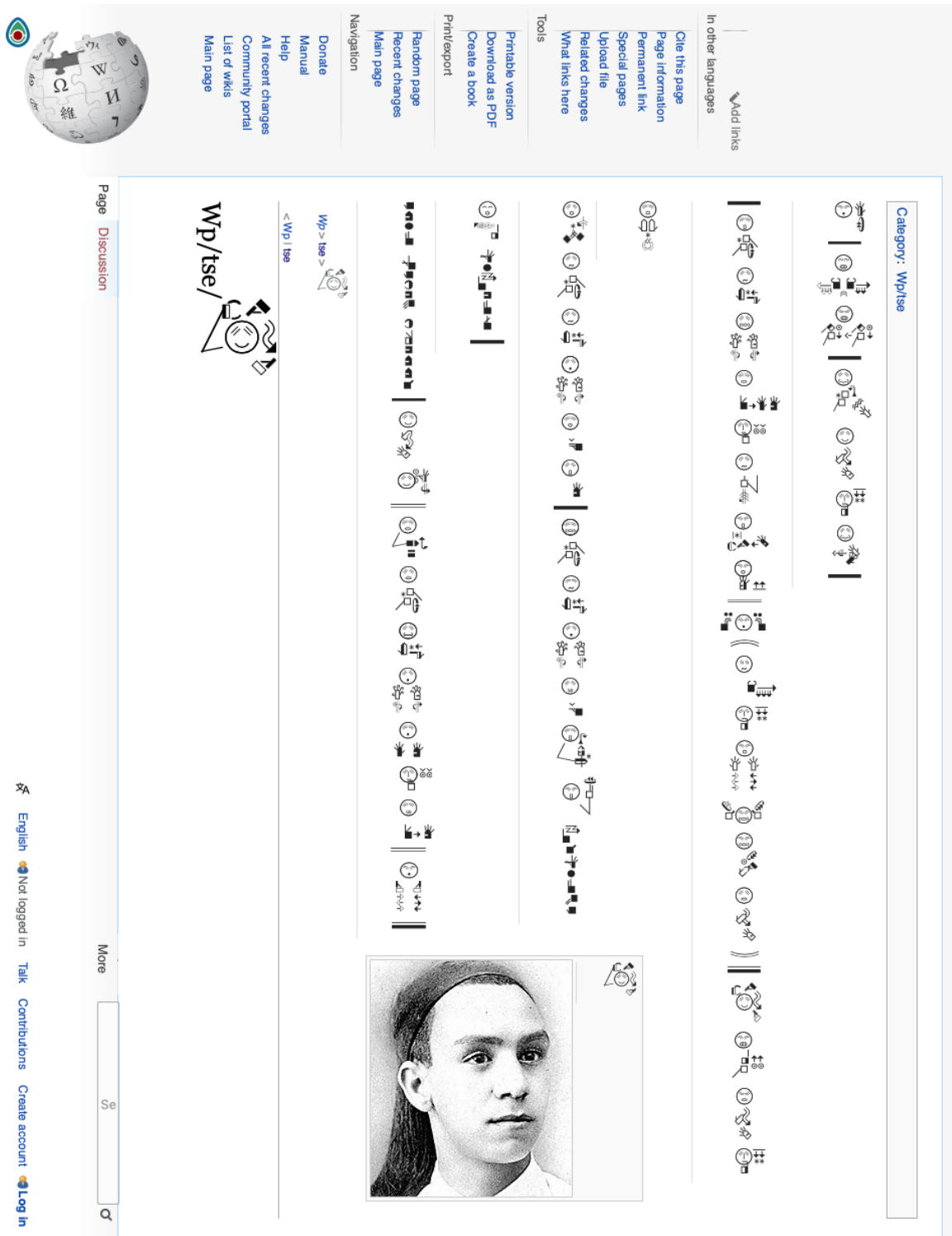


Figure 8b: Tunisian Wikipedia article.



Figure 8c: The Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) Wikipedia:

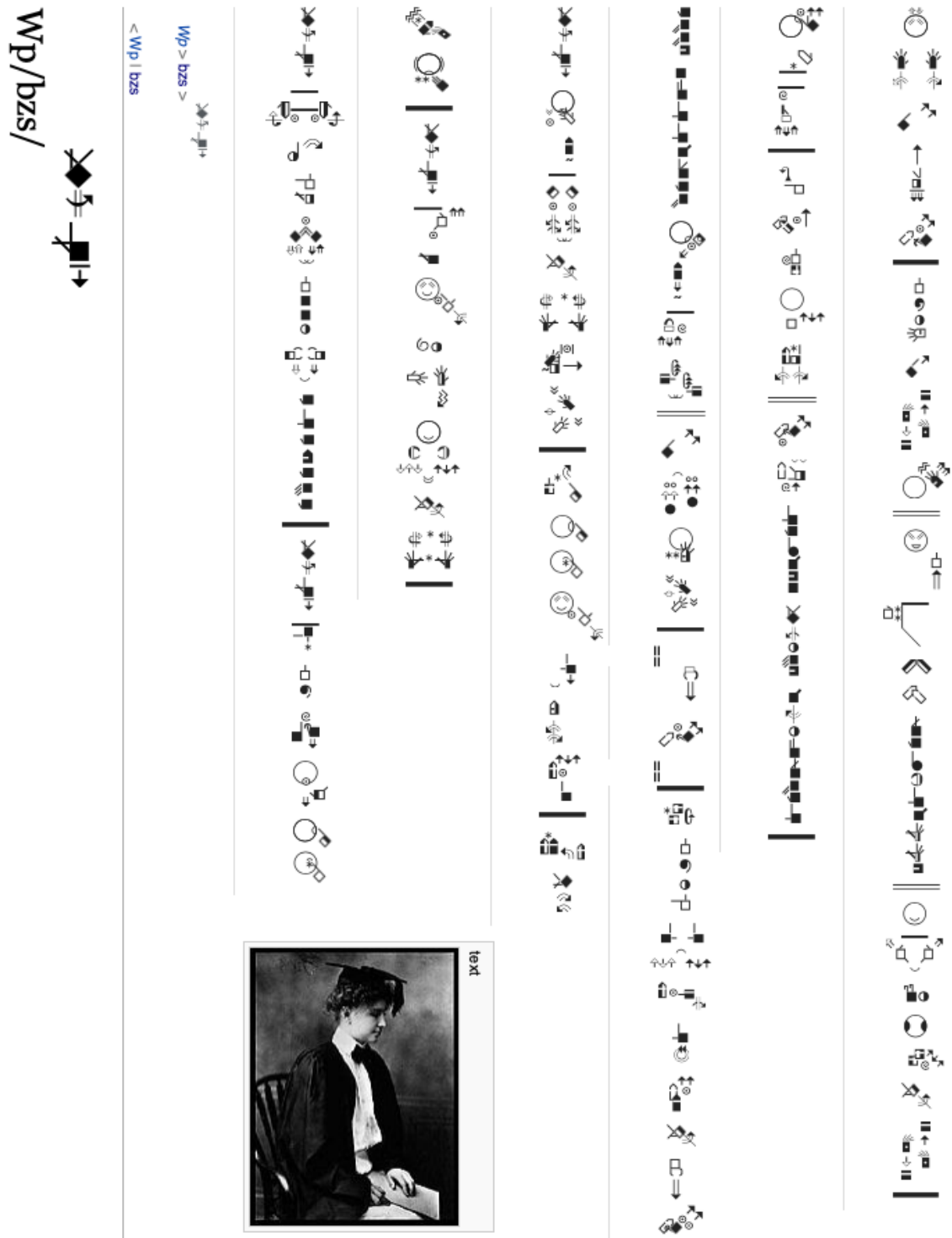


Figure 8c: LIBRAS Wikipedia article.

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