The Uruguayan Deaf Community

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Abstract

The Uruguayan deaf community appears to use a single sign language, Uruguay Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Uruguay [LSU]), although there is some variation in its use throughout the country. Sources point to geographical region and age being sociolinguistic variables impacting language use. Linguistic research of LSU began in the 1980s and, with significant legal support from the Uruguayan government, research and documentation of LSU has been pursued for the last several decades. Sign language dictionaries have been created with hopes of continuing standardization of LSU and increasing its prestige throughout Uruguay. Although there is much that remains to be done to create an environment of total access, community development for the Uruguayan deaf community appears to be moving in a positive direction and has been underway since the founding of the first deaf association in 1928. In Montevideo, the Uruguay Deaf Association (Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay [ASUR]) and Center for the Investigation and Development of Deaf People (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Persona Sorda [CINDE]) are effectively bringing the deaf community together and training interpreters to meet ongoing educational and social access needs throughout Uruguay. Future community development work is focused on increasing access to interpreters in university and health care settings, as well as creating an atmosphere where deaf Uruguayans have equal employment opportunities that capitalize on their individual skills and training.
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1 Overview of Uruguay

Uruguay is located in South America between Brazil and Argentina and the South Atlantic Ocean. Uruguay has a land area totaling 176,000 square kilometers (109,000 square miles) with a terrain that consists mostly of grasslands and hills. Cerro Catedral, the highest point, reaches 514 meters (1,686 feet) and lies east of Montevideo, Uruguay's capital city. See Figure 1 for a map of Uruguay (CIA World Factbook 2010).

Figure 1: Uruguay map

Uruguay is divided into nineteen departments. The largest departments are Montevideo with 1.3 million people, Canelones with 520,000, and Maldonado (east of Montevideo) with 150,000 people. The two principal cities are Montevideo on the southern coast, with 1.3 million people, and Salto, on the northwest border, with 99,000 people (Brinkoff 2009).

2 Uruguayan Sign Language

The estimated deaf population for Uruguay is 30,000, of which 7,000 are said to use sign language (Belloso 2009 and Soares 2008). In 2004, according to the National Institute of Statistics, there were about 28,600 deaf people in urban areas of Uruguay (Aguiar 2006).

In 1989, the Uruguayan government began showing an official commitment to Uruguayan Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Uruguaya [LSU]) when they adopted Law 16.095, which supported the research, teaching, and dissemination of LSU materials (Garcés 2006). In 2001, Law 17.378 recognized LSU as the natural language of the deaf community. According to this law, interpretation is to be provided on television and for other events in the deaf community. Law 17.378 also requires government buildings with public access to have visual notifications such as light alarm systems (Penades 2001). In 2008, Law 18.437 began referring to LSU as not only the natural language, but the native language of the Uruguayan deaf community (Wikipedia 2011).

Although it is unknown at what point the Uruguayan deaf cultural community developed, Behares (1986) indicates that there were already deaf communities present in Montevideo, Salto, and Paysandú.
in the early 1980s. LSU reportedly shares similarities with the sign languages of Argentina and Brazil, but as the deaf communities have developed unique national deaf identities, their sign languages have also diverged into distinct sign languages.

Groups of deaf people gathered together in schools, associations, or informal meetings within and between Montevideo, Salto, and Paysandú on a regular basis, leading to the development and use of a fully developed sign language within their communities in the western part of Uruguay. In comparison, places like Rivera on the northeast border with Brazil and Maldonado on the southern coast have not traditionally had the same amount of contact with these more active deaf communities and there are some reports that deaf people in these cities may use sign varieties quite distinct from the sign language used in the more unified and larger Uruguayan deaf communities of Montevideo, Salto, and Paysandú.

Because of sustained contact between the two largest deaf communities, in Salto and Montevideo, these cities’ sign language varieties are considered to be very similar. However, there are a few differences, which is reportedly most evident in differing number signs and manual alphabets. It is probable that the Montevideo manual alphabet has a historical connection to a sign variety used in Spain, and the Salto manual alphabet to the two-handed manual alphabet used in Great Britain, leading to differences in the finger spelling of Spanish vocabulary in these Uruguayan deaf communities. Behrase et al. (1986 and 1988) also indicate that the Montevideo sign variety may show more vocabulary differences based on age groups within its community than that of Salto, with the younger generation using a sign variety with greater amounts of standardization that includes lexical borrowing from Argentinean and Brazilian sign languages. These differences have led some to consider LSU as having two dialectal forms: Montevideo Sign Language and Salto Sign Language (Harrington 2007).

Research conducted in the 1980s showed that nine percent of deaf people learned LSU before the age of three, 46 percent between the ages of three and ten, and 28 percent after the age of ten. Roughly, half learned LSU at school, and the other half at the deaf association or through other avenues. When participants were asked if it was beneficial for deaf people to learn LSU, over 75 percent of deaf and hearing people who work with the deaf community agreed that it is beneficial. In comparison, only 50 percent of hearing parents of deaf children thought it was beneficial, with many wanting their children to only learn how to speak and integrate into hearing society. Deaf participants were asked about how free they feel when signing in public and 69 percent (mostly male) said they are comfortable while 21 percent (mostly women) said they occasionally felt embarrassed (Behares 1986 and 1988).

Projects in Uruguay that focused on LSU development were already in process as early as the 1980s. In 1988, the sign language dictionary *La lengua de señas Uruguaya: su componente lexico basico* was published in a bilingual format unlike any other sign language dictionary at the time. It was divided into two parts: description of the Uruguayan deaf community and their language use and attitudes toward it, as well as the basic lexical constructions of LSU. It is organized by LSU handshapes and offers a description of the meaning of the sign in Spanish, instead of having a single Spanish word definition. In addition, the Federación Uruguaya de Cooperativas de Ahorro y Crédito (FUCAC) gave a sizable donation to the Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay (ASUR) for the creation of another sign language dictionary. Out of this, the *Diccionario Bilingue de Lengua de Señas Uruguaya/Español* was published in 2007 and consists of 2,000 words (of a total estimated 10,000 LSU lexical items) used in the deaf community. A few goals of this dictionary were to promote LSU’s status as a real language, preserve it, and to encourage deaf people to make books a part of life. The first dictionaries were distributed among the special education elementary and high schools in the capital and interior of Uruguay. The Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay (ASUR) hopes to create more books for deaf children and adults in the future (LR21 2008b).

### 3 Deaf education

Free public education is offered to all Uruguayans and physically disabled students have been mainstreamed since 1985. Articles 33–35 in Law 16.095 states that all disabled children are to be integrated into regular classrooms, beginning in preschool and for the remainder of their educational experience, as long as it is beneficial for the student. Whenever necessary, additional support is to be
As of 2007, there were 2,500 students with special needs integrated into schools (Education International 2007).

As of 1986, deaf children could receive education in one of four special schools for deaf children in Montevideo, Salto, Maldonado, and Rivera, or attend separate classes for deaf children at regular schools, mainstream schools with an interpreter, or a mixture of any of the available options that best meets the needs of the student (Behares 1986). However, at the time of this research, we identified seven schools that offered deaf educational opportunities. In the capital city of Montevideo, these included four schools: the Centro Educativo para el niño con Déficit Auditivo (CEENDA), Escuela de Discapacitados Auditivos N 197, the Liceo 32 “Guayabo,” and Liceo 35 Instituto A. Vazquez Acevedo (IAVA). The other three deaf educational centers were established in the 1970s in Maldonado, Rivera, and Salto. In Maldonado, the Escuela para Discapacitados Auditivos N 84 was established in 1973. In Rivera, Escuela para Discapacitados Auditivos N 105 was established in 1976. In Salto, Escuela Especial N 116 para Sordos was established in 1977.

Oralism was the communication philosophy in Uruguayan deaf schools until, in 1989, bilingual education was instituted in Montevideo's Escuela 197, with oralism being used in the morning and sign language in the afternoon (Behares 1986). Of the 134 deaf elementary children in 1996, roughly half went on to secondary school and only nine of these graduated, something that was believed to be the result of a lack of communication access through interpreters in the classroom (LR21 2006). Because of this, interpreters were brought into Liceo 32 and Liceo 35 in 1996 (Luz Verde 2010). At the time of this research, Liceo 32 had a separate class for deaf students, taught by a hearing teacher through an interpreter (Crespi n.d.). At CEENDA in Montevideo, many deaf students are integrated into hearing schools, using CEENDA as a source for supplemental oral training (Sitio de Sordos n.d.). However, with the support of the Asociación de Padres y Amigos de Sordos del Uruguay (APASU), CEENDA teachers now use sign language in the classrooms and take sign language courses through the Center for Investigation and Development of Deaf People (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Persona Sorda [CINDE]) (Luz Verde 2010). As of 2009, deaf children were integrated into hearing classrooms with interpreters in Salto, Maldonado, and at IAVA in Montevideo (Belloso 2009). Unfortunately, deaf children in the interior of Uruguay do not have sufficient access to interpreters or formal education (LR21 2008b).

CINDE worked for fifteen years to make university accessible to deaf students. The Law 17.378 does not include provisions for interpreters in the university, but, with the help of the Bienestar Universitario, an agreement was signed in 2006 to provide interpreters at the university level. In 2007, deaf students who entered the university had access to an interpreter as a result of the agreement between Universidad de la Republica, Bienestar Universitario and CINDE. As of 2007, at least one deaf student was enrolled at the university with access to two interpreters/note-takers (Noticias Uruguay 2007). As of 2009, there were fourteen deaf university students who had interpreter fees paid by the Departamento de Bienestar Universitario (Belloso 2009). In 2010, Noticias Uruguay (2007) indicated that there may soon be as many as fifty deaf students enrolled at the local university.

4 Deaf associations and organizations

A number of organizations have been established by and for deaf Uruguayans, with most headquarters based in the capital city of Montevideo. The first of these was the national deaf association, Asociación de Sordomudos de Uruguay (ASMU), which was founded in 1928. Deaf members quickly began joining and attending from the capital and interior of the country. ASMU later changed its name to the Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay (ASUR) and now provides a social meeting place, as well as offering training for the local community in life skills, such as how to work with computers, acting, and English (LR21 2008b and Sordos.com.uy 2008). As of 2010, there were about 120 members attending the various meetings that occur for everyone on Saturdays: two separate meetings for youth and women on Friday evenings, and a sports group on Monday evenings (Pivac 2010). The ASUR building in Montevideo includes a sports hall (basketball court, ping pong, lounge and bar), a senior citizen room, and a room for offering sign language classes (Sordos.com.uy 2008).
In 1988, Charles and Mary Swanner, missionaries from the United States with the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board, moved to Montevideo and were invited by ASUR to help teach English. Through their ministry, they also helped start the Manos Inspirados en el Apoyo a los Sordos (MIAS). MIAS’ goal is to equip deaf Uruguays to reach out to other deaf people throughout their country and, as a result of their work, eleven of the nineteen departments in Uruguay now have Christian deaf ministries (Brandon 2008 and Swanner 2004). In Montevideo, there are five evangelical churches with deaf ministries, including Comunidad Cristiana para Sordos, Iglesia Comunidad Cristiana del Uruguay, Iglesia Bautista Bethesda, Iglesia Biblical Bautista El Redentor, and Iglesia de Punta Gorda.

In 1993, the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Persona Sorda (CINDE) was founded with three primary goals: to have sign language recognized as the natural language of deaf people across Uruguay (which was accomplished in 2001), to develop interpreter training, and to raise the quality of life of deaf Uruguayans (Sordos.com.uy 2008). As a result of Law 17.378, a program for certified interpreters was established at CINDE. They offer a two-year sign language course or five-year interpreter training course. Classes taught by deaf teachers meet three to four times a week (Swanner 2004). LSU classes are also taught in at least three political departments north and east of the capital: Durazno, Canelones, and Treinta y Tres (Sordos.com.uy 2008). In 2009, there were two hundred students at CINDE and fifty were studying sign language interpretation (Belloso 2009). At least one Argentine linguist, Graciela Alisedo, is involved in teaching interpreting students a few days each month at CINDE (Romero n.d.).

In 1994, the Association for Parents and Friends of the Deaf in Uruguay (Asociación de Padres y Amigos de Sordos del Uruguay [APASU]) was founded with the goal of helping families find good educational opportunities and placements for their deaf children. APASU also strives to help deaf children integrate into hearing society and participate in events relating to their deaf experience.

A number of other organizations are involved with the Uruguayan deaf community, including the Asociación Ayuda Mutua de Sordos del Uruguay, Asociación de Intérpretes de Lengua de Señas Uruguaya, Asociación de Sordo Ciegos del Uruguay (ASCUY), Organización Deportiva de Sordos del Uruguay (ODSU), Servicio Central de Bienestar Universitario, Asociación de Sordos de Maldonado, Asociación de Sordos de Durazno (ASDU), and Asociación Pro Hogar de la Sordomuda.

Although only one deaf association was found outside of Montevideo (in Durazno), it is probable that there are several others in Uruguay, but specifics were not found during this research.

Access

At least 50 percent of the employable population without disabilities is employed, whereas, only 16 percent of the employable disabled population has work. In addition, their average income is 27 percent lower than the general population and females with disabilities have an even more difficult time finding employment than males (LR21 2008a). Although Education International (2007) states that four percent of public jobs are set aside for people with disabilities, the president of the Asociación de Sordos de Durazno (ASDU) indicates that most deaf people, even those that have graduated from secondary school, have minimal career choices resulting in most working in agriculture.

Although interpretation is legally required in many avenues through the establishment of Law 17.378, as of 2006 there were still no public interpreters outside of the government available, and even schools still lack interpreters (LR21 2006). As recent as 2008 (and perhaps still continuing), the coordinator of CINDE interpreted for a 30-minute segment on Channel 5 at noon, but some deaf people found this hard to access because the interpreter is shown in a very small box on the screen (Aguiar 2006 and Palomeque 2008). Channel 10 offers captioning, but ASUR wants to see a program offering both an interpreter and captioning because there are many deaf people who do not know sign language and others who are not very literate (Belloso 2009). The president of CINDE stated that at least fifty percent of Uruguay’s deaf population cannot read or write (LR21 2006). In addition, the quick pace of captioning is only understood by deaf people who learned to speak Spanish before losing their hearing. In 2008, the Red de Cines (Cinema Network) began to offer movies with sign language interpretation along with subtitles (Sordored 2008). According to Ausserbauer (2009), interpreters are now focusing on meeting needs in health institutions and hoping to grow to be able to address needs in other areas of life.
6 Conclusion

There is no record describing the emergence of the Uruguayan deaf community, but urban deaf communities and sign language use were reported in the 1980s in the western part of the country. Although deaf schools initially used oralism as the preferred communication philosophy in deaf education, bilingual methods that incorporated sign language and Spanish began to be adopted into deaf schools in 1989. Although there may be some variation in sign language use throughout the country, with some sources pointing to geographical region and age being sociolinguistic variables impacting language use, it still appears that the Uruguayan deaf community uses a single sign language: Uruguayan Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Uruguayana [LSU]).

Linguistic research of LSU began in the 1980s and, with significant legal support from the Uruguayan government, research and documentation of LSU has been pursued for several decades. Publications, such as dictionaries, have been created with hopes of continuing standardization of LSU and increasing its prestige throughout Uruguay. LSU may be similar to sign languages in Argentina and Brazil, since there appears to be continual interaction from both countries, especially with Argentine professionals in linguistic and educational domains.

Although there is much that remains to be done to create an environment of total access, community development for the Uruguayan deaf community appears to be moving in a positive direction and has been under way since the founding of the first deaf association in 1928. In Montevideo, the Uruguay Deaf Association (Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay [ASUR]) and Center for the Investigation and Development of Deaf People (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Persona Sorda [CINDE]) are effectively bringing the deaf community together and training interpreters to meet ongoing educational and social access needs throughout Uruguay, and not only in the capital city. Future community development work is focused on increasing access to interpreters in university and health care settings, as well as creating an atmosphere where deaf Uruguayans have equal employment opportunities that capitalize on their individual skills and training.

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