



# Documenting the Use of Iranian Sign Language (ZEI) in Kermanshah

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LREC 2022  
Marseille

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## Introduction

Zaban Eshareh Irani (ZEI), also referred to as Iranian Sign Language (Behmanesh, 2006) is a sign language used by the Deaf community in Iran. It has been observed that there is regional variation among ZEI signers from different provinces of Iran (Siyavoshi, 2017). However, this variation does not impede their mutual intelligibility.

Although people in the Deaf community in Iran use ZEI to communicate with peers, it is not yet on a par with other spoken languages in Iran. The present study is the documentation of ZEI as used in Kermanshah, a city in West Iran and was funded and supported by ELDP, (Endangered Languages Documentation Programme).

## What was recorded and how?

The total number of participants in this project was 36, from which 18 were female and 18 were male. We decided to record deaf participants in 3 age groups: young (18 to 30 years old), middle aged (30 to 50 years old) and elderly participants (over 50).

Two participants who had almost the same age were recorded in each session. The tasks we had included:

Task 1: Elicitation of the signs of the Farsi alphabet as well as fingerspelling of 23 words written on a paper.

Task 2: The production of 100 signs elicited by picture clues on a laptop screen. These pictures included the most common animals, colors, food, as well as some basic concepts related to family, home, and city life in the context of Iran.

Task 3: storytelling: We played two different (silent) stories for each signer in a session: "The Pear Story" and the "The Other Pair" (Rozik, 2014). Signer 1, for instance would watch the Pear Story on a laptop screen and tell the story of the movie to her/his partner. Likewise, signer 2 would watch the other story (The Other Pair) and retell it to his/her partner.

Task 4: The moderator asked questions about different subjects. We had prepared some questions about daily issues for the Deaf community in order to encourage them to sign in a natural context. The questions were asked only to inspire them to sign and there were not any true or false responses. Almost 16 hours of natural conversations were recorded in this task.

Finally, in addition to the four tasks, we also recorded a gathering of the deaf community in the Deaf club in order to document more natural conversations without any interventions or interruptions from our side.

## What was annotated?

In this project, one hour of conversations between 18 signers in different sessions were annotated. ID-glosses were documented in a new dataset for ZEI in the lexical database Global Signbank, along with citation forms selected from the elicited data. Global Signbank was the only available option for hosting data in an existing multilingual database, and that it provides links to ELAN (by offering an ECV, external controlled vocabulary, for glossing in ELAN). The citation forms were re-created for the Signbank. We recorded the most frequent signs from a search result in ELAN. We aim to describe these signs in terms of their phonological and semantic properties in future.

## The Preliminary Results

A very brief look at the data collected in this study shows that three minor differences can be observed between the other variants of ZEI studied so far and the variant signers use in Kermanshah:

1) Some signs are different from the way they are signed in Tehrani (the capital city of Iran) ZEI which has been studied the most. These include the signs for "teacher", "man", "news", "village", "cheating", "exam", "train", and "math" (An example is provided in Figures 1 and 2).

2) A few alphabet letters are finger-spelled differently between participants from the way they are signed in Tehrani ZEI: *te* [t], *če* [tʃ], *dâl* [d], *ze* [z], *že* [ʒ], *fe* followed by their corresponding IPA symbols). (An example is provided in figure 3 and 4).

3) The mouth patterns of some signs were different from those of Tehrani ZEI. We hypothesize that this is due to the use of Kurdish, which is the local spoken language in Kermanshah.



Figure 1: The sign for "teacher" in Kermanshah



Figure 2: The sign for "teacher" in Tehrani ZEI



Figure 3: The sign for letter "te" [t] Kermanshah



Figure 4: The sign for letter "te" [t] in Tehrani ZEI

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