

People with hearing impairment in films

(scientific paper)

Pavel Kučera

Abstract: *The topic of deaf people and their world is presented quite often both on TV and in films. When watching movies and TV series featuring deaf people the question arises about the way in which communication of people with hearing impairment is portrayed. What is the motivation of filmmakers when choosing a specific form of communication? There are films featuring the deaf where the hearing audience's beliefs in stereotypes and untrue myths about the deaf tend to be reinforced. This article presents several films and series of Czech and foreign origin which – in one way or another – deal with the topic of hearing impairment.*

Key words: *deaf, sign language, lip reading, lay and professional interpreters, subtitles, spoken language of the deaf*

1 Introduction

In spite of the progressive improvement of the level of knowledge on the subject of people with hearing impairment, we have to stress that the general population is still subject to prevailing misrepresentations, half-truths or myths about people with this type of impairment. The primary tool providing information to the broadest public is the media. The presentation, attractivity, interesting construction and appealing form of adaptation of the work can determine in a fundamental way the attitude of the general and especially the lay population towards individuals with hearing impairment. Cinematography is dominant – the film being “a work providing an image of reality through specific audiovisual means. While using individual external reality features it creates its own artistic reality with the objective of making an artistic impact.” (team of authors, 1999, p. 288). It is also necessary to point out that when creating

any audiovisual work specific knowledge and a high professional level of the team are necessary. Film production is therefore an extremely intricate process during which cooperation of many individuals exercising different professions is a must. For the movie, each profession is irreplaceable and each influences its final shape. The making of the movie is identical regardless of its length, budget, casting and it is carried out in three phases – that of preproduction, production and postproduction. Bergan (2008) mentions the personal status and points out that “*within the preproduction and production phase, the important people include producers, film directors, screenplay authors and actors who constitute the category ‘above the line’ – usually they enjoy higher status and vastly different salaries. The category ‘below the line’ covers cameramen, composers, editors, costume designers, production directors, stunt men and sound engineers.*” (Bergan, 2008, p. 91). The last phase is that of postproduction. Besides some specific professions coming into play at this stage (such as that of the editor, sound engineer, composer and the special effects team), this is the time for the presentation and distribution of the film (in *ibid.*). It is therefore obvious that the process of creating a movie is a highly complicated one and is subject to a commitment of a substantial number of people. The resulting nature of the film which plays such an important role in forming public opinion and peoples’ standpoint on the given issue is influenced by the way the information is presented and by its quality – in our case by proportionate and correct message related to hearing impairment. In the next part of this paper we shall list false information still prevailing in the general population linked to the communication of individuals with hearing impairment and whose impact can be reinforced through its presentation in films.

One of the mistakes is to perceive the sign language as a universal and understandable communication tool for all deaf people regardless of any other circumstances (for instance geographical and regional determination). Many research inquiries carried out in the 1960’s in the United States by Tetauer (2008) dismantle this myth and support the fact that sign languages are different even if some of their grammatical features are similar. Since – as any language – the sign language continues to evolve and reacts to timely needs of its users, there are differentiations both amongst sign languages in different states and among their varieties within one single country. If we talk about sign language which we consider to be the communication system of the deaf we must talk about a natural language, that is about a language which has not been created artificially but came into being through the natural evolution in the framework of the community of the deaf and their culture. It is therefore obvious that the sign language is a language with its own grammar, vocabulary and community of users and is independent from the spoken language preferred by the majority. In spite of this autonomy the sign language, as a language of a cultural minority, has not been exempt from particular influence by the majority language which is, however, a specific feature of minority languages in general (Macurova, 2008).

Further problems related to the understanding of sign language and, consequently to its adoption by the majority population are closely linked to the perception of the grammar of the communication system. The grammar of sign language has another type of transfer and a structure different from the language of the majority. Thus the preference of that communication system had been primarily suppressed and not supported. We even have evidence of attempts to liquidate it entirely. Bimova and Okrouhliková (2008) state that this trend was present especially prior to 1989 since the communist regime at that time did not support anything that would deviate from the established norm. Sign language, especially because of its visual-motoric existence, was not included in the established norm. For this reason deaf people communicating in sign language only find their way into Czech films after 1989. The recognition of sign language which is now perceived as a natural communication system of the deaf people, comparable to spoken language both structurally and functionally, had been enhanced by linguistic research (launched in the Czech Republic from 1993 onwards) and the initialisation of the reception of the deaf as a language and cultural minority. Subsequently the sign language found its way to the general public and that in turn has been reflected not only by the media and culture but in education and legislation as well (Bimova, Okrouhlikova, 2008).

2 Films with the theme of hearing impairment

This part of the paper will mainly deal with foreign and domestic film production featuring people with hearing impairment both in leading and supporting roles. What follows is a structured list which is by no means exhaustive and final. Nevertheless it does offer an updated picture of available films dealing with this subject matter.

There are several dozens of films in world cinematography depicting the issue of hearing impairment or possibly the use of sign language as the main communication tool. In comparison to the Czech production, foreign cinematography offers a much larger and more interesting mix of films with deaf protagonists either in lead or in supporting roles.

- One of the oldest films is called **The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter** (1968). It offers a mosaic of stories featuring a handful of quite distinct characters including first of all the “deaf-mute” John Singer (Alan Arkin) losing his best friend (suffering from a hearing and mental impairment) who has to be placed in an institution.
- Another picture which is also part of the first wave tells the story of a deaf agent (“hearing with his eyes and talking with his gun”) and is called **Deaf Smith and Johnny Ears** (1972).
- **See No Evil, Hear No Evil** (1989) is a comedy about two men with a hearing and sight impairment who happen to be the only witnesses of a murder. In spite of the

fact that the first had not seen anything and the second had not heard anything they become the target of both the police and the mob.

- The best known movie is the American drama **Children of A Lesser God** (1986). The protagonist – a girl named Sarah – is played by Marlee Matlin, a deaf actress. Her excellent performance won her an Oscar for the leading woman role. She also played in countless other films – for instance in the **Bridge to Silence** (1989), **Hear no Evil** (1993) or **In Self Defense** (1999).
- **Piano** (1993) – the three Oscars winning film – features not a deaf or a deafened person but a “mute” woman Ada. The reason for listing this film amongst other works depicting hearing impairment is primarily due to communication by sign language and lip reading.
- One of the sources of humour in the comedy **Four Weddings and a Funeral** (1994) is the communication between two brothers out of whom one is deaf. The humour is therefore based on sign language which the brothers use in public to exchange information assuming others do not understand them.
- **Mr. Holland’s Opus** (1995) is an American musical drama narrating the story of an ambitious composer and teacher of music with an accent on the relationship he entertains with his deaf son trying – as a musical artist that he is – to come to terms with the boy’s deafness.
- The subject of music and hearing impairment is also present in the picture **Copying Beethoven** (2006). It describes the last years of the famous composer, especially the period of his deafness during which he successfully composed – with the help of a young man’s friendship – his famous Ninth Symphony.
- The movie **It’s All Gone Pete Tong** (2004) is the story of a succesful DJ who, in the course of his life, loses his most precious tool – his hearing. In spite of this Pete does not give up and tries to find a way how to continue to play and create music which is all to him.
- **Babel** (2006) is a very good movie indeed. It brings on five seemingly unconnected stories – one of them being that of a deaf student – a girl named Chieko. Following her mother’s death the girl becomes withdrawn in a world of her own silence trying to solve her problem of solitude and need for somebody close (Křestánová, 2007).
- **Goya’s Ghost** (2006) – an American-Spanish cooproduction features the deafened painter Goya and his interpreter. The story is set in 1792 when Goya comes to the Spanish royal court as the royal painter. The Catholic church was then busy strengthening its power through new Inquisition. Following a mock trial and due to a fault by her friend Lorenzo Ines – Goya’s Muse – is sentenced for blasphemy. Many years later the deaf Goya meets Alice, a young prostitute, through whom he learns the entire truth about Ines and father Lorenzo.

- The film **Universal Signs** (2008) features several deaf persons played by deaf actors. According to the authors of the film, however, “...*the picture is not a story about deaf people but a story about being deaf. Not to hear is not considered to be a physical indisposition and the world of the deaf is portrayed as a colourful and culturally rich community, represented by some strong characters (...). It is mostly a black and white film with occasional dream sequences in colour, expressing emotions. The story is told in sign language (ASL) and features occasional signs with written notes for the hearing audience as in old silent films.*” (www.csfd.cz).
- The boy **Who Wanted to Be a Lion** (2010) is a thrilling movie screened at the 2010 Fresh Film Fest. It is the story of a small deaf boy who longs to be somebody else and carries on with his life regardless of possible dangers and pitfalls.
- Actors with hearing impairment also appear in some American series. This is the case of the **Sue Thomas: F. B. Eye** series (2002) featuring Deanne Bray – an actress who doesn’t hear on her right ear and has a loss of 78 dB on her left one. Throughout her entire life she has been trying to use both her remaining hearing and lip reading and this helped her to get the part in the above mentioned series. The film is more of a mystification of the hearing viewers since the agent manages to lip read almost 100 percent of what others say which is entirely unrealistic in real life.
- **Switched at Birth** (2011) is another American series featuring deaf actors. It is a story of two families whose babies, one of them deaf, had been switched 17 years ago. The story unfolds depicting mostly the clash of two entirely different cultures, ways of life and opinions. Slowly – with difficulties but still – there comes understanding and connection of the two worlds – that of the hearing and that of the deaf.
- The drama **Beyond Silence** (1996) even got an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. It describes the life of a teenage girl who is both an interpreter and an intermediary between her deaf parents and the outside world. When the girl accidentally discovers her talent and passion for music and goes away to study, she and her parents drift apart. The film is mostly about complicated decision making and attempts to live one’s own life (www.ceskatelevize.cz).
- The Japanese romance movie **A Scene at the Sea** (1991) is not only the story of a young deaf man who loves surfing but especially about his discipline, his overcoming the handicap and about the relationship with his deaf girl-friend. The film is based on images, actors’ face-play, emotions and the music completing the description of the deafs’ world of silence for the hearing viewers.
- We could also mention yet another example of European cinematography – a Slovak film about sounds – **Silence** (Ticho) (2010). This movie was made by a student of the Bratislava Musical Arts School. Interestingly enough, there is no

spoken word – only a background sound which completes the atmosphere (TKN – 22. 10. 2011).

Czech films portray hearing impairment especially through the loss of hearing of the main protagonists. This is the case of both the biographical film about Bedřich Smetana called **In my life** (Z mého života) (1954) also describing a part of the composer's life and work after he becomes deaf and that of a more recent film called **Guard No. 47** (Hlídač č. 47) (2008). Here, the protagonist loses his hearing only temporarily and later only pretends to be deaf. Czech cinematography includes only a handful of films in which directors have cast deaf people – both actors and nonprofessional actors – in lead or supporting roles.

- **The Past** (Minulost) (1998) is one such an example. This film tells the story of Francis, a deaf young man who is discharged from prison and sets out to find his girl-friend – the only bright thing in his life and the memory of a happier past. The specific nature of the film lies in the fact that it is entirely narrated from the subjective standpoint of the deaf Francis without any spoken word. The authors wanted to capture and bring closer the world of deaf to hearing viewers through an attempt of rousing identical feelings amongst them and the protagonist. Therefore it was necessary to put aside spoken word and replace it by music and sound which complete emotions and intentions of individual scenes for the benefit of the hearing viewers. The advantage of the absence of spoken word is also the accessibility of the film for deaf people themselves (www.csfd.cz).
- Another picture made by Czech directors featuring a deaf person in a supporting role is **Pupendo** (Pupendo) (2003). Lukas Baborsky is deaf and communicates through sign language with his schoolmates and family. Besides, this is the first Czech movie in history with at least one subtitled copy (intended for screening in movie theaters) provided for people with hearing impairment (Brožík, 2003).
- The deaf further appear in other Czech films such as for instance **Dirty Soul** (Duše jako kaviár) (2004), the series **School in the Limelight** (Škola na Výsluní) (2006) or in the ten minutes long **In my apartment I Live Alone** (Ve svém bytě bydlím sám) (1995). This last black and white sketch is a short film about the inhabitants of one apartment – a blind man and a young deaf couple (www.csfd.cz).
- There are also two documentaries made in coproduction with Czech Television that can be listed among Czech films about the deaf and with the deaf in lead roles – **Poems for Two Hands** (Verše pro dvě ruce) and **As I Hear** (Jak já to neslyším).
- **Poems for Two Hands** (Verše pro dvě ruce) (2008) portrays the life of prelingual deaf poetess Eliška Vyoralíková from Zlín who – despite her total loss of hearing – has mastered the Czech language to the extent of being able to write and publish poetry in Czech. Her poems were then performed in sign language by students of

the Drama Education for the Deaf at Janáček Academy of Musical Arts in Brno. The documentary depicts especially the proces of creation of sign interpretation of the deaf author's poems (www.csfd.cz).

- The documentary **As I Hear** (Jak já to neslyším) (2008) introduces seven people with different types and levels of hearing impairment. It is composed of interviews and scenes from their lives. The objective is to educate the hearing public still very much influenced by myths about people with hearing impairment. The documenary also features scenes from the theater performance of students of Janáček Academy of Musical Arts in Brno – the Drama Education for the Deaf (Kratochvílová, 2008).

3 Research – introduction and methodology

The primary objective of the research presented below and based on two inquiries – in the Czech republic and in Germany – was to map out what is the communication system in films preferred by people with hearing impairment. The main issue in the research was to find out whether there are parallels in communication of deaf heros in films and in the communication of people with hearing impairment in real world.

The inquiry is based on the analysis of 30 films screened either in movie theaters or broadcast on TV. The material represents a random selection of international films from 1968–2012 with most of them made from the beginning of 1990's until 2012, With approxiamtively two thirds of them being American movies.

The analysis and comparison of partial results will be based both on the research carried out by the author of this paper and on the analysis made in the framework of the theses of Marlies Hochfeld from Hamburg University who focused her work on the issue of communication of deaf people in films. The summing up and implementation of results of both inquiries was demanding not least because the respondents did not know all the films and moreover they repeatedly evoked films directed by people with hearing impairment. The number one task was to register films made by hearing people about people with hearing impairment – that is to map out possible continuation of myths, untruths or mistakes about the communication of people with this impairment.

The main selected research method was the qualitative method of the interview (conducted also with a webcam) with the advantage of direct interaction with the respondents. The interview had the form of a half-structured dialogue based on questions prepared in advance including querees from the following spheres of interest:

- to map out what films the respondents know and which they had seen;
- to find out in each picture what part is played by lip reading;
- to take stock of the respondents' evaluation of the spoken language used by the deaf;

- to find out what is the respondents' perception of interpretation performed by family members;
- to map out the possible presence subtitles in some parts of the film;
- to evaluate whether the information provided is interpreted to a deaf person.

The reason why preference was given to semistructured interview was also the opportunity to make possible corrections during the process and have a chance to possibly explain some querees to respondents in more details.

The selection of respondents was carried out through the method of intentional sample selection, which is probably *"the most wide-spread selection method that we come across in the process of applying the qualitative approach"* (Miovský, 2006, p. 135). Miovský (2006) states that this selection process fosters targeted search of such individuals that not only comply with the criteria set by the researcher but are also willing to take part in the research. The group of respondents was composed solely of the Deaf (with capital D) as a cultural and language minority who enjoy watching movies and series. They were between 25 and 55 years of age and communication was carried out in sign language (the deaf express themselves better through an interview than they would in spoken or written language). The respondents were 57 in total and the ratio of men to women was 3 to 1.

The interviews were carried out during December 2012 and January 2013 and then processed and evaluated. The construction of questions asked was based on the interviewer's own knowledge of the subject and on accessible sources (specialised publications, magazines, encyclopaedia, text-books, internet links and films seen). The venue for interviews was the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University and the Faculty of Education of Palacký University (including the coffee-shop – depending on the respondent and his or her availability). The use of webcam has eliminated distance and thus increased the number of respondents. Questions and answers were registered on a digital camera and the duration of the interview varied between 20 and 60 minutes. In the beginning the respondents were given assurance about the anonymity of the research and information about the research objective and use.

4 The results of the research inquiry

In our research we concentrated first on lip reading. The results of the inquiry showed that deaf actors prefer this way of communication by a quantitative value of 62 per cent. This means that for people with hearing impairment lip reading is the most favoured tool of communication in film and on TV screens. The viewer was presented with deaf heros mastering, over fractions of seconds, lip reading to perfection and, with the help of binoculars, even acquiring information from the lips of people sit-

ting on a distant park bench. This almost superhuman ability attributed to the deaf must have stuck in the minds of filmmakers otherwise they would not use it repeatedly – a phenomenon typical for contemporary films as well. Specialised literature (see for instance Strnadová, 1998; Krahulcová, 2002) states, however, that only one third of spoken language can be lip read through visual registration of vocal organs' mobility. The remaining two thirds are not accessible this way therefore it is possible to complete the information based on the context of the dialogue. It is also necessary to note that the quality of lip reading is determined by factors such as optimal field of sight, the distance between communicating partners, adequate lightening, distinct speech or adapted speech tempo. Another important factor is the content of the message, especially the active and passive vocabulary of the person with hearing impairment. These factors however are phenomena that do not play any important role in the researched movies.

All this shows the apparent persistence of myths linked to lip reading and the existence of an intensive preference of this form of communication which is incompatible with the reality. What is the reason of this persistence? The answer might be the fact that lip reading is often part of the film plot. For instance in the American movie **Hatred is Blind** (1950) the hearing hero is using his deaf brother George as a spy. George lip reads clandestinely over the corridor and, what's more, from somebody he only sees from the side. His brother comments as follows: *"George's great, a little foolish, but what a job he does lip reading and from what a distance...!"* In the Canadian TV thriller **Dead Silence** (1997) the deaf hostages can read important information from the FBI negotiator lips which, later, helps them to run away. Another American thriller **His Bodyguard** (1997) portrays a deaf man sitting in a car lip reading from somebody whom he sees from the side making a call in a phone booth. The deaf artist in the German TV film **Death in Your Eyes** (1999) reads the lips of two people sitting nearby plotting a murder.

Another sphere of our interest was the presence of a sign language interpreter in the film. Having analysed the acquired data we can state that 58 percent of films feature hearing individuals as lay interpreters who interpret in different situations for their deaf relatives. Most cases involved family members of deaf protagonists or their partners. Until the end of the 1990's lay interpreters continue to appear quite a lot in films and then they disappear. Two film directors exploit the character of the "natural interpreter" – who is a hearing child of deaf parents. The films **Love without words** (USA 1985) and **Beyond Silence** (Germany 1996) feature deaf actors playing the parts of deaf parents. Love without words was made with the participation of Julianna Fjeld – a deaf producer and actress. Caroline Link, who made Beyond Silence, analyses experiences and characters of deaf people directly in their community. Therefore both films are authentic and describe real problems of interpreters who are family members.

In case of lay interpreters, the situation in films and real life is the same. The hearing family members, neighbours and friends interpret to the deaf in everyday situations, therefore they take on the role of the interpreter without any formal education and without the entitlement to remuneration. Moreover those who come across the deaf when exercising their profession often stand in as communication intermediaries. This is especially the case of social workers and teachers of the deaf. Occasionally some negative aspects of this activity are pointed out – such as direct manipulation of the deaf, bestowing advice or even direct decision-making on behalf of persons with this impairment. Interpreting services for people with hearing impairment should, however, be of good quality. The interpreter must respect the Interpreter's Code of Conduct and at the same time he or she must adapt to each client since interpreting in sign language is a highly individualised matter. To safeguard unequivocal sense of the message and respect for the client should be self-evident. In the fictitious world of film we come across the opinion that use should be made of professional interpreters – this is the case in the British-American comedy **In Love, Spoiled And No Money** (1990) and in the movie **Voices** (USA, 1979) in which Ms. Rose manipulates her deaf sons. Forman's American movie **Goya's Ghosts** (2007) features a professional interpreter but as the results of our research point out, more than half of the respondents do not favor such a presentation. They state that in those days (1st half of the 19th century) there were no professional interpretation services provided. Further reactions show that the interpreter did not respect the Code of Conduct – he did not keep a permanent eye contact, was continually observing things around him, waged into improper nonverbal communication. Also, the lightening was inadequate.

We shall now say a few words about the particular question of the interview aiming at mapping out communication in sign language without translation for hearing viewers. If we look at individual scenes characterised by communication in sign language without interpretation we realise that these are mostly romantic relationships between a hearing person and a deaf person. The main objective is to stress their lack of mutual understanding which sets the romance on and then leads possibly to bitter disappointment and to conflicts. As our analysis shows, 18 percent of respondents do not consider sign language communication as problematic but on the other hand it needs to be said that 63 percent of the interviewees state that – given the stress on the richness of sign language – it would have been beneficial to provide subtitles for such scenes or to interpret them into spoken language for the hearing audience. The benefit of such a screenplay could be a genuine transfer of the world of the deaf, an authentic identification with this problem and an opportunity to show that good understanding without words between people with hearing impairment and those without is possible. This can be illustrated by the American film **Bridge to Silence** (1989) which opens up by a love scene of two young people communicating through sign language. The hearing viewer does not understand their conversation but he is

aware of the honest and warm nature of the relationship between the two protagonists. The genre of melodrama offers more such films, for instance **Love is Never Silent**, **Love without Words**, **Silent Love** (2001). The love scenes of deaf actors are not interpreted in spoken language, nor are there subtitles. The authors' intention is probably to leave the sign language with a kind of aura of a "secret language" serving the purpose of describing a fragile relationship. For instance in the film **Beyond silence**, sign language is described as a "magic language". According to the Hollywood way of thinking sign language should sometimes symbolise the intimacy of a loving relationship. The use of sign language without interpretation in crime series should excite the viewer who does not understand and is curious to know what will follow. These examples show that some filmmakers use sign language without interpretation on purpose especially in order to describe feelings resulting from the denial of direct interaction with one's entourage. Sometimes there is a drive to model the situation of loss of hearing – such as for instance in the film **Beyond Silence** where the viewer has the opportunity of authentically experiencing the unpleasant sensation of a deaf protagonist when his sister plays the clarinet. The respective scenes are shot without sound or with a subdued and unclear sound. Therefore the use of sign language without interpretation shows the authors' intention to stir emotions (for instance alienation, isolation, anxiety, stress).

Another subject that was the theme of our research is the communication of deaf people with their environment through spoken language. The analysed data from research carried out in Germany confirm this form of communication in 48 percent of films under examination. It is necessary to point out, however, that in early films deaf people clearly either do not make any sound or speak without visible verbal deficits with the exception of deaf children who sporadically display typical characteristics of the speech. The real expression of verbal communication of people with hearing impairment was first presented in the movie **Voices** (1979). The results of inquiry carried out in the Czech Republic point out that 91 percent of interviewees do not perceive the use of sign language parallelly to loud speech of the deaf as an interference. In most films under examination almost all deaf protagonists speak with their authentic voice. A deaf person who starts speaking after a long time or for the first time ever often represents a rewarding figure for many film authors who can thus create emotionally strong moments aiming at pushing the audience to tears or stirring the film towards a spectacular happy end. The reasons that make people with hearing impairment decide not to speak are analysed in the film **Voices**. A bright singer by the name of Drew talks his deaf girl friend into at least once demonstrating her voice to him. The girl says: *"I don't sound good."* To which her boy-friend says: *"I don't care how you sound, it's you I care about."* The boy-friend's brother comments on the girl's voice *"Your voice doesn't sound bad, it sounds like the voice of a stranger."* His ironic

words balance out the melodramatic side of this subject. Melodrama prevails for instance in the Italian romance film **To Once Hear Your Laughter** (1993).

During our research the respondents stated that in more than half of the films hearing protagonists both speak and use sign language and they also stressed that the overwhelming majority of hearing characters communicate in signed language of the given country. The reason probably is that most of the actors did not know sign language prior to the shooting of the film and the mastering of signed language is faster than in case of sign language. Therefore filmmakers use signed language since it is a simpler way to create signed communication understandable to hearing viewers without the need to use subtitles which they do not like too much anyway. In reality outsiders are often bewildered by the strange speech the deaf. Deaf actress Emanuelle Laborit says that people with hearing impairment do communicate partly in spoken language but that it creates many misunderstandings. False information and many errors resulting from the use of spoken language are one of the reasons why the deaf strongly refuse spoken language as their main communication tool. The simultaneous use of verbal communication and sign language is incorrect since these are two entirely distinct languages with different grammar, structure and rules. The integration of those languages produces an artificially created signed language which might not always be understandable to the communicating person.

Another theme of our research was the subject of verbal comments of sign language by hearing people in movies. Such a film provides the benefit of bringing in the expression of the deaf person to the hearing audience by means of sign language used by the deaf person whilst a hearing person interprets the message into spoken language (for himself or herself and thus for the hearing audience). After the analysis of the research results it is obvious that 82 percent of the respondents perceived possible positive aspects of such an interaction, yet 17 percent of respondents would prefer the scene to be subtitled. This approach was applied in the film **Silent Lips** (1948) the first film to use sign language. A similar method was used in the well-known American film **Children of a Lesser God** (1986). As stated above, in previous films featuring the issue of hearing impairment, deaf protagonists remained totally silent, with no communication or, on the contrary, spoke perfectly and read lips without problems. Sporadic signs were not translated and remained incomprehensible to the viewer.

The research in the theses by the German author Marlies Hochfeld deals with yet another interesting subject – the issue of interpreting the communication between the hearing and the deaf into sign language. This fact is registered in 38 percent of the films and starting from the 1990's the number of interpreters, especially on TV screens, has been on the rise. For quite a long time, filmmakers did not consider it necessary to translate the communication in sign language to hearing viewers. The change has begun with the growing number of deaf people appearing in films. That process was also linked to increasing self-esteem of deaf heroes in films and theatre

plays. Since then people with hearing impairment do not appear in films only as poor victims but become witnesses, lawyers, hostages, guilty or innocent suspects (in crime genres). Casting someone in an important deaf part naturally implies casting alongside a character who is an interpreter in sign language. Interestingly enough it happens mainly in TV series (60 percent of the total TV production). This is probably linked to increasing TV public preference of series as such and to a certain financial advantage for film producers. Interpreters usually appear in thrillers, crime films and series or series from the courtroom with the interpretation of court proceedings, police interrogations, dialogues with mandators, judges and defense lawyers. When asked whether professional interpreters perform a quality job, 75 percent of respondents stated that it was difficult to assess unequivocally. The reason is first and foremost insufficient quality and quantity of scenes involving professional interpreters and quickly changing takes of the communicating individuals in the scene.

The objective of film directors and authors of series is not to describe the profession of the sign language interpreter yet we can find scenes featuring the interpreter and offering in parallel an authentic picture of the profession. For instance, films point out problems facing the interpreter and resulting from poor organisation of work. Furthermore films include references to the Code of Conduct and to interpreters rights and obligations. That fact is obvious for instance in the film **Prosecutor and Cop** (USA 1992) where deaf people and their interpreter demand their right for an adequate translation of the content. Approximately 70 percent of TV production was made with the cooperation of deaf actors or staff. In spite of the fact that it would be possible to find alternatives to scenes involving an interpreter, his or her presence in the daily life represents a phenomenon so natural that to include an interpreter part in an adequate situation does not represent any problem for filmmakers.

The use of subtitles represents a specific issue. We could suppose that subtitles would appear in films where the deaf protagonist appears more often. Results show, however, quite the contrary – only 8 percent of answers registered in the German research testify that fact. Subtitles in film have been used for instance in the British comedy **Four Weddings and a Funeral** (1994). In spite of the occasional presence of subtitles the film obtained two Oscar nominations. Another such example is the fully subtitled film **Beyond Silence**. The use of subtitles has one big advantage – deaf protagonists can communicate through their own communication means, i. e. through sign language, hearing viewers can simultaneously follow the communication in a foreign language and understand it fully. The director of **Four Weddings and a Funeral** had thus been able to provoke many comical situations. Subtitles are one of the best options to arrive at subtle understanding on all sides and achieve a powerful portrayal of deaf people communication. Thanks to the cooperation of experts, a well researched situation in the community of the Deaf and modern technical means it is possible to create film scenes showing regular communication in

the deaf community. Why, then, are they seldom used? Hochfeld is of the opinion that subtitles are the invention of the 1990's and are therefore still in their evolution phase. They necessitate a certain level of technical equipment which is maybe also the reason why they had not been used so often. Moreover, the production of subtitles is complicated and costly. Our research showed that almost all respondents were happy with films being subtitled and did not really care whether these were hidden or on-screen. The Czech law makes it mandatory for all films on CD-ROM and DVD supports to be provided with subtitles. As stated in Act 231/2001 Coll. and in the Czech Television Act 483/1991 Coll., broadcasting of hidden or on-screen subtitles is listed amongst the fundamental obligations of broadcasting operators. The provider of licensed nation-wide TV broadcasting services (Nova TV and Prima TV – author's note) must provide at least 15 percent of broadcasts with closed or on-screen subtitles whilst – unless the law does not state otherwise – the nationwide TV broadcasting operator is legally (Czech TV Act –author's note) bound to provide at least 70 percent of broadcasted material with closed or on-screen subtitles for people with hearing impairment.

5 Conclusion

This paper offers a theoretical and empirical view into a specific and interesting subject of the people with hearing impairment in films. We based ourselves on our own research carried out through interviews and on the analysis of and comparison with the German research – the theses of Marlies Hochfeld from the Hamburg University.

The objective of this paper was twofold – first to provide a basic picture of the researched subject and to offer an overview of accessible foreign and domestic films dealing with the issue of communication of people with hearing impairment and – second, to come up with answers to question related to untruths and myths around sign language. The subjects included for instance polemics related to lip reading of people with hearing impairment in films, discussion about the verbal communication of people with the impairment and mapping out of the role played by lay or professional sign language interpreter. We also dealt with the issue of signed language and with the theme of possible preference of subtitles.

Whilst pointing out the general public's evolving perception of the proces of communication among people with hearing impairment, the results of the research also demonstrate persisting deficiencies and in so doing carve out avenues for further research.

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(reviewed twice)

Mgr. Pavel Kučera
 Institute of Special Pedagogical Studies
 Faculty of Pedagogy of Palacký University
 Žižkovo nám. 5, 771 40 Olomouc
 tel.: +420 608 883 149
 e-mail: pavel.kucera@upol.cz, kuceraenator@gmail.com