35 years of ACILS History

Professionalizing a Language, Building a Profession

The history of ACILS is inseparable from the history of the professionalization of sign language interpreting in Catalonia. When the association was founded in 1991, sign language interpreters had little social or institutional recognition. Interpreting existed, but it was largely carried out by relatives of Deaf people or by volunteers, within a care-based model that failed to recognize the linguistic complexity and professional responsibility involved in this work.

Seven interpreters decided that this situation had to change. Founding a professional association at that time was an act of vision and resistance: a structure had to be built from scratch to defend training, fair working conditions and the recognition of a profession that was virtually invisible to the hearing majority and still met with some resistance within the Deaf community itself, which was accustomed to earlier care-based models.

From the outset, the association worked around two fundamental principles that would shape its entire history: sign language is a full, natural language, and interpreting is an essential professional service. These two principles guided all its work during the early years.

The Founding Years: Laying the Foundations (1991–1999)

The 1990s were a period of intense development. ACILS promoted the first interpreter training courses recognized by the public education authorities, a remarkable achievement in the Spanish context. Convincing institutions that sign language deserved a place in formal education was a complex task requiring negotiation, awareness-raising and perseverance. Institutional understanding was limited: it was often necessary to explain from scratch what a sign language was and why qualified professionals needed to be trained.

At the same time, members of the association worked with members of ILSE (*Intérpretes de Lengua de Signos de España*) from across Spain to draft a professional Code of Ethics, jointly establishing principles of conduct, responsibility and relationships with service users. This document did more than regulate professional practice: it also helped build a collective identity and a shared sense of professional responsibility.

During these years, ACILS actively participated in national and European seminars, collaborated in the creation of professional networks and contributed to the establishment of international forums for coordination among interpreters. The association understood that the profession could not grow in isolation: it needed dialogue, exchange and external reference points.

Towards the end of the decade, discussions with the Department of Education became increasingly frequent. The objective was clear: to secure stable, formally recognized training. This sustained effort led to the launch of the official higher vocational training program in Sign Language Interpreting in 1995, a turning point that consolidated the profession within the education system.

During this same period, the association formally incorporated the role of guide-interpreter for deafblind people, broadening its scope and recognizing the diversity of communication needs.

University Education and Recognition (2000–2010)

The beginning of the new century marked a period of consolidation. The presence of interpreters in educational, institutional and social settings gradually increased. The profession began to gain visibility, although working conditions remained precarious. ACILS acted as a professional representative before

public authorities and took part in discussions on bilingual education, accessibility and linguistic rights. Defending Catalan Sign Language became inseparable from defending the profession.

A major milestone was reached in 2008 with the creation of a university degree program offering a sign language pathway at the Faculty of Translation and Language Sciences of Pompeu Fabra University. This represented a significant step forward in interpreter education. For the first time, Catalan Sign Language interpreting became fully integrated into university education, further consolidating the profession.

Another key moment came in 2010, when the Parliament of Catalonia passed Law 17/2010 of 3 June on Catalan Sign Language. This law represented a historic milestone in the institutional recognition of LSC and a decisive step towards safeguarding the linguistic rights of Deaf people. For the interpreting profession, the law strengthened the framework that legitimizes its role: when a language is recognized, professional interpreting becomes essential to ensuring that its speakers can exercise their rights.

Consolidation and a New Chapter (2011–2016)

In 2011, ACILS and FESOCA signed an agreement to regulate working conditions, aiming to bring greater stability to the sector and establish shared criteria. This was an important step in a context still marked by precarious employment and a lack of clear employment structures.

The first university graduates completed their studies in 2012. In 2016, the final cohort of the official higher vocational training program graduated, confirming the sector's transition towards university-level education.

ACILS played an active role throughout these developments, advocating for strong training programs and the importance of maintaining academic quality. The association understood that professionalization necessarily depended on higher education.

In 2016, coinciding with ACILS's 25th anniversary, a new chapter begins for the association. After years in which successive boards kept the association alive with the time and resources available to them, the association's activities and collective engagement gradually lost momentum. The lack of new board members and the accumulated exhaustion made it increasingly difficult to maintain activities and launch new projects. Change becomes necessary to bring renewed energy, encourage greater member participation and give the association a fresh impetus. A new board takes on this challenge, determined to revitalize the association and address growing job insecurity. The message is clear: the fight for decent working conditions must be renewed, and the cohesion of the professional community strengthened.

Community, Advocacy and International Reach (2017–2026)

From 2016 onwards, the association stepped up its community-building activities. It promoted affordable continuing professional development, university talks, activities for members and self-funding initiatives that helped sustain training projects. The aim was not only to defend rights, but also to build a professional community.

Between 2018 and 2023, one of the most ambitious projects in ACILS's history took shape: Signapp, an application featuring signs in Catalan Sign Language, developed as a tool for reference and dissemination. The project required years of collective work and became a point of reference. In 2023, it was presented at an international sign language interpreting conference in South Korea, attracting international attention. In 2025, it received the Catalan Government's Language Policy Award as the best initiative promoting Catalan Sign Language.

Signapp represents a new chapter: technology serving the language and the profession.

Institutional Commitment and Continuity

Throughout its history, ACILS has maintained an active presence beyond individual milestones and specific projects. Members of successive boards have participated in national bodies, contributed to the development of reference documents and advocated for Catalan Sign Language and the interpreting profession across Spain. The association has taken part in professional seminars, forums and discussion spaces, recognizing that institutional representation is an essential part of its responsibility.

All these teams have shared a common thread: their commitment to and appreciation for the profession and sign language. This continuity, sustained generation after generation, is one of the association's greatest strengths.

Alongside this work, ACILS has consistently organized activities for its members, including specialized training, talks, community activities and initiatives that help fund the association and reinvest resources in the professional community.

35 Years On: A Living Legacy

Reaching 35 years is about more than marking the passage of time. It demonstrates that a profession born in invisibility has secured a place in academia, gained legal recognition and developed a collective identity.

ACILS's history is the sum of generations of interpreters who have upheld the same conviction: sign language interpreting is an essential service, a social responsibility and a professional practice that deserves respect.

The journey has been marked by tensions, negotiations, progress and setbacks. Yet each stage has strengthened the collective structure. The association has adapted to technological, educational and social changes without losing sight of its founding purpose: to defend sign language, protect the profession and safeguard rights.

Thirty-five years later, the decision made in 1991 is still alive. It is not simply a memory, but a driving force.

And the future, like the past, is built collectively.

Associació d'intèrprets de llengua de signes i guia-intèrprets de Catalunya