1.1. Historical background

As is the case for many sign languages, we can ideally draw a line in the history of Italian Sign Language marking the time preceding and following the International Congress for the education of the Deaf held in Milan in 1880.

By the end of the 18th century, Italian Deaf children were educated in (usually religious) residential institutions where great attention was given to the use of signs, as testified by the publication of some early grammars written by Deaf educators (Marzullo 1857).

Deaf children were sent to these institutions between the ages of 3 and 6. In most cases, namely if they had hearing parents, their first exposure to LIS would coincide with their entrance into the institution, while it was more precocious if they came from a deaf family. It was mainly through interaction with the native deaf peers that LIS was acquired by those students who had no prior exposure to the sign language.

In such institutions, deaf people received an education that we would today call bilingual: they learnt LIS (although it was not yet perceived as a real language and it had not yet probably developed into the complex linguistic system we use today) and (albeit to different degrees) written and oral Italian.

The deaf students used the two languages in different social contexts: LIS (or some gestural communication system depending on the parents’ sign language competence) with the family and deaf friends and Italian with the hearing population.

What seems relevant for the time, is the presence of deaf educators teaching in these special institutions and actively participating in the ongoing debate regarding the best methods to use in educating the deaf, as testified by some writings taking a stand in favour of the use of signs (Carbonieri 1858).

With the new dispositions emerging from the Congress of Milan stipulating oralism as the only educational method, the use of signs was banned in the class and Deaf educators were removed from their teaching positions
and relegated to laboratories where they taught deaf students handicrafts (see Russo and Volterra 2007; Volterra 2011).

The resolution in favour of oralism was strongly influenced by the fear of the Catholic Church that the linguistic emancipation of the deaf would drive them away from the Church’s control and influence.

Nonetheless, Italian Sign Language continued to survive in the students’ private interactions and among the adult members of the new associations emerging at the beginning of the 20th century in Italy, all converging in what would become the National Deaf Institute (ENS) in 1932 (Corazza 1995; Russo and Volterra 2007).

A main effect of the resolution was the decay of deaf education: access to knowledge was only permitted through the oral language which did not allow deaf students a full comprehension as they hardly mastered it until late in their education.

A further outcome of the Congress’s educational policy was the increasing fragmentation LIS experienced, effects of which are visible still today. The lack of a linguistic standardization was encouraged by the prohibition of sign, by the segregation between male and female students in the institutions, and by the isolation of the different institutions often present in the same city. Such a social and educational situation gave rise to isolated linguistic communities, each of which developed its own LIS variety.

The education of the Italian deaf changed in 1977 with the approval of the law 517/1977 determining the possibility for handicapped students (including the deaf) to be integrated in public schools together with hearing children and supported by special education teachers. The resolution, while ending the deaf students’ segregation in special institutions, reduced their opportunities to meet deaf peers and, for most of them, to learn Italian Sign Language. The increasing migration of deaf students towards public schools led to a gradual impoverishment of the sign language among the few deaf students still attending the special institutions and eventually their closure.

This situation lasted until a new educational policy was approved, as described in the following section.

1.2. The Italian Deaf community today

The 1990s are characterized by a growing interest in social and educational issues concerning deaf people and by new attempts to study Italian Sign Language. The first associations for the study of LIS were born. Their aim is to organize LIS courses at different levels including courses for interpreters.
The National Deaf Institutes started offering courses on LIS as well. The courses are offered to hearing people (teachers, hearing children of deaf parents who intend to work as interpreters, and others who are in contact with the Deaf,) who, as a consequence of the growing visibility and presence of deaf students and adults in the hearing community, want to know something more about their language.

It was, however, with the law 104 in 1992 that the right of deaf signers to be assigned an interpreter at university was recognized, thus opening up the path towards a university degree for deaf people. In 1997 LIS was included among the languages that can be studied at university within the field of glottology, linguistics and foreign language didactics. Elementary, middle and high schools registered the presence of so-called communication assistants whose main role is to bridge the communication barrier between deaf students, special education teachers and their hearing peers. In addition, deaf educators began working in kindergardens, providing deaf children with rich linguistic signing input, as well as representing deaf adult reference figures.

The first attempts towards bilingual education started in these years. Bilingual schools opened, offering classes in Italian and LIS to both deaf and hearing students from kindergarden to high school. LIS has been experimentally taught in some public schools to hearing students with encouraging results: exposure to the sign language improves the children’s attentive and memory abilities.

In 1995 the first national convention on LIS was organized in Trieste. Italian Sign Language is massively used in all the activities coordinated by the National Deaf Institutes and a relevant improvement in the diffusion and standardization of the language has been the translation of the national news by a LIS interpreter (albeit much reduced in their version). The first dictionaries of Italian Sign Language have been published by both deaf and hearing people (Angelini et al. 1991; Romeo 1991; Radutzky [1992] 2001). Furthermore, Deaf communities started organizing cultural and artistic events where deaf artists present plays and poems in Italian Sign Language.

Despite the cultural and linguistic awakening Italian Sign Language has experienced in the last twenty years, its linguistic recognition is yet to come. As widely known, in 2006 the United Nations approved the Convention on the rights of disabled people, which was signed by Italy in 2007. Among these rights is an explicit mention of the recognition and promotion of the deaf community’s sign language in order to support and encourage its linguistic and cultural identity. At the time of writing, the Italian Deaf community is still waiting for the Italian Parliament to recognize what the linguistic, deaf and hearing community have already demonstrated to be a natural language.
Today the Italian Deaf community appears to be very heterogeneous in different respects: family background (namely, the presence in the family of hearing or deaf people); education (signing vs. oral); the presence or absence of technological aids (hearing aid, cochlear implant); and linguistic competence in the oral and in the sign language.

Italian Deaf people continue to receive protection from the State as belonging to the disability community. The welfare policies adopted on their behalf consist of a monthly check and the right to be employed by public and private companies. However, those policies do not include the right to be offered free interpretation services, which are not provided in public offices or events, hospitals, conferences and the like.

1.3. Linguistic research on LIS

Linguistic research on Italian Sign Language started with the pioneering work carried out by the CNR in Rome at the end of 1970s. The initial aim of the research team led by Virginia Volterra was to develop innovative methods to help deaf children reach a better competence in the spoken language (see Russo and Volterra 2007; Volterra 2011). Soon, however, the team’s investigation concentrated on the lexical, grammatical and syntactic properties displayed by LIS in search for a linguistic structure similar to that found in spoken languages, in the spirit of previous investigations carried out on American Sign Language (Stokoe 1960; Klima and Bellugi 1979, a.o.).

The results of the first linguistic investigations on LIS were gathered and published in the first Italian handbook on Italian Sign Language edited by Virginia Volterra, La Lingua dei Segni Italiana (1987), including examination of distinctive parameters, facial expressions, some morphological and syntactic aspects, and the use of the manual alphabet. The book, recently re-published, represents the most complete description of LIS available to date.

The research carried out by the CNR also concentrated on the linguistic acquisition of deaf and hearing children contributing to the growth of a bilingual education while developing new strategies to evaluate the linguistic competences of deaf children directly in LIS (Pizzuto 2002; Tomasuolo 2006). It also focussed on the comparison with other sign languages (Corazza and Volterra 1988); on the study of classifiers (Corazza 1990); on the iconicity/ arbitrariness of the signs (Pizzuto and Volterra 2000; Boyes-Braem, Pizzuto, and Volterra 2002); and on the linguistic analysis of LIS poems (Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto 2001), a.o.
From 1999, formal linguistic investigation within the framework of generative grammar was undertaken by a group of researchers from different Italian universities (Università di Milano-Bicocca, Università degli Studi di Milano, Sapienza Università di Roma, and Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia). The analysis concentrated on different aspects of the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of Italian Sign Language aiming at finding on the one side the same universal principles shared by all spoken languages and on the other side those features that are peculiar to sign languages in an attempt to verify the validity of hypotheses advanced for spoken languages and to shed light on the possibilities made available by the human faculty of language.

As a whole, it is possible to find an evolution in the direction taken by the linguistic research on LIS: from an initial effort to investigate the linguistic properties shared by LIS and Italian in an attempt to demonstrate the linguistic nature of LIS, to a more recent direction aiming at analyzing how the different modality is responsible for the peculiar linguistic features displayed by the two languages. Typological studies concentrating on the similarities and differences between sign languages started including LIS in an attempt to describe the universal tendencies characterizing sign languages.

The interest of linguists, psychologists and speech therapists in Italian Sign Language has determined the growth of a new awareness and pride within the Italian Deaf community regarding the linguistic status of its language, thus contributing to its development and diffusion.

As formal linguistic investigation on LIS began, it appeared evident that there was no standard language against which the great variation present in the national territory could be identified and described. With the purpose of conducting a systematic study on the phonology, lexicon, and syntax of LIS and in line with some previous investigations of the same kind (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001; Schembri, McKee, McKee, Pivac, Johnston, and Goswell 2009; McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, and Hill 2011), between 2008 and 2010 a group of researchers from three Italian universities (Sapienza Università di Roma, Università di Milano-Bicocca, and Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia) worked on a national funded project (Progetto di Ricerca di Interesse Nazionale: PRIN) granted by the Italian Minister for Learning, University and Research. The main goal of the project was the construction of a LIS corpus representative of the language employed by the Italian Deaf community.

The construction and analysis of the corpus aimed at identifying a LIS version that could be recognized as the standard one, a necessary step towards its official recognition. A future goal of the project is the compilation of the first descriptive grammar, a fundamental tool for conducting linguistic
research on LIS. The presence of a reference grammar for LIS would also permit typological comparisons among sign languages and between sign and spoken languages as well as being a didactic tool for LIS courses and interpreting services.

As is the case for many Deaf communities, about 5% of Italian Deaf people qualify as native signers. In order to be representative, the LIS corpus had therefore to include the majority of LIS signers whose exposure to the sign language was belated. About 18 participants were interviewed in each city for a total of 165 Italian Deaf people.

The investigation analyzed the social and linguistic factors and the interactions responsible for the variation observed in the language. The following social factors were taken into consideration: geographical origins, residence in a rural or city environment, age, gender, level of education, type of school attended, social status (namely, his/her role in the Deaf community), and presence/absence of deaf people in the family.

The material was gathered in ten Italian cities distributed across four regions: the north, the south, the center and the islands. The choice of cities was guided by size and by the presence in the past of an institute for the deaf education, possibly responsible for the occurrence and diffusion of language variation.

Signers were recorded while engaged in four different tasks: free conversations, monologues, question/answer elicitation dialogues, and picture naming.

A national deaf project coordinator was responsible for the collection of the data together with a hearing collaborator; however, no hearing person or researcher was present during data collection. A local member of the National Deaf Association of each city appointed by the national deaf project coordinator was in charge of the video sessions.

So far, the corpus has been analyzed only partially under different linguistic aspects: order constituents, *wh*-questions, non-manual marking, the pronominal system and lexical variation.