

## **The Story of Key Word Sign in Australia**

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Key Word Sign Australia supports a collective of state-based associations that promote the use of Key Word Sign across the country. Key Word Sign is a technique that offers unaided communication to people with little or no speech. Key Word Sign involves the simultaneous use of speech and manual sign however signing is used only with the key words in the sentence. (Vandebeet, Maes, Lembrechts, & Zink, 2011, Grove & Walker, 1990). Manual signing with speech has also been referred to as *total communication* or *simultaneous communication* (Mirenda & Iacono, 2009). Manual sign and gesture is often used as part of a multimodal system of communication by people with complex communication needs, as the manual sign or gesture is produced with speech and/or aided options to enhance communication (Millar, Light & Schlosser, 2006). To date, a variety of key word signing packages have been developed and become popular in Europe and Australia, including the Makaton Vocabulary (Grove and Walker, 1990)

<http://www.makaton.org/aboutMakaton/>, and Signalong (Grove, 1992)

<http://www.signalong.org.uk/> in England and Streeflijstwoordenschatvoorzesjarigen (Schaerlaekens, A., D. Kohnstamm, D. & Lejaegere Lisse M. (1999) in Belgium and Lamh (<http://www.lamh.org/default.aspx>) in Ireland.

The creation of a Key Word Sign vocabulary for Australia represents an important move towards a culturally and ecologically appropriate vocabulary for use by and with people living in Australia with complex communication needs. Prior to development of an Australian Key Word Sign vocabulary set in 2010, the Makaton Vocabulary was the most common vocabulary of manual signs used in Australia.

Developed in 1972 in Surrey, England, the name Makaton™ (Grove and Walker, 1990) was derived from a blending of the initials of its creators: MA (Margaret Walker), KA (Kathy Johnston), and TON (Tony Cornforth). Makaton™ was initially developed to teach a set of functional signs to institutionalised adults with severe intellectual disability who were deaf. In the late 1970s, the original vocabulary was adapted and modified for use by both children and adults, and was formalised into a package to teach communication partners how to use a key word signing approach. The Makaton™ organisation became known as the Makaton™ Vocabulary Charitable Trust (Grove and Walker, 1990). In the early 1980s, Ann Cooney began using the vocabulary at Stockton Hospital in Newcastle, NSW, and thus Makaton™ was introduced to Australia. Shortly after, the administrative base of Makaton Australia was established at The University of Newcastle. A licensing agreement was made between Makaton™ and the University to support research, training, and resource development in Makaton™ in Australia. After a national tour by Margaret Walker, State-based associations were also formed in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia. In 2014, The University of Newcastle ended its involvement with Key Word Sign and Scope took over as the home of Key Word Sign Australia. Scope is a large not-for-profit organisation providing disability services. <http://www.scopevic.org.au/>

### **Early Modifications to Makaton in Australia**

In the early years of Makaton™ in Australia, (1977 and 2001) there were some changes to the Makaton™ vocabulary to increase its cultural and ecological appropriateness for an Australian public:

- (i) the source of manual signs was changed from the Signed English Dictionary (Jeanes & Reynolds, 1982) to the Auslan Dictionary (Johnson, 1998);
- (ii) additional Australian resources for training in Makaton<sup>TM</sup> were produced such as Key Signs: A Supplement to the Makaton Vocabulary: Auslan Edition (Ryan, Keesing & Basterfield, 2002); The Makaton Vocabulary: CD ROM, (Cameron, M., Howell, I. & Bloomberg, K., 2005); Sign with Me: Learning Strategies for Key Word Sign DVD (Makaton Western Australia, Disability Services Commission) and Sing and Sign with me (Ryan, 2002);
- (iii) the original vocabulary was modified culturally to reflect the needs of people living in Australia. Thus, words with a specific meaning within an Australian context (e.g., kangaroo, football, and Vegemite<sup>TM</sup>) were included in the supplementary vocabulary set (Ryan, Keesing & Basterfield, 2002);
- (iv) Australian Makaton Presenters<sup>1</sup> began to be trained in aided and unaided augmentative communication systems and strategies to reflect the multi-modal options for people with complex communication needs. Presenters are usually speech pathologists or special educators with a background in speech and language development. Presenters are trained in all aspects of augmentative communication including Key Word Sign and aided systems and strategies. Children and adults who use Key Word Sign often have a range of other aided forms of communication;

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<sup>1</sup> Presenter is the term used for a person qualified to deliver workshops in the use of Key Word Sign and gesture.

(v) the format used to deliver Makaton™ training was modified for the Australian context. In the UK the training was delivered in nine stages introducing approximately 40 signs per stage. The introductory or basic workshop included teaching in stages 1, 2 and 9 of the Makaton™ vocabulary. The modification made to the introductory workshop for Makaton™ in Australia significantly changed the content of the introductory vocabulary and incorporated words designed to support interaction. The first set of words/signs was based on “expert opinion” and was referred to as the ‘Interactive Vocabulary’ (Brownlie, 1999). The interactive vocabulary comprised words that would form a core vocabulary as a ‘foundation’ for building communication and interaction skills. Instead of introducing manual signs based on an open-ended stage 9 of the Makaton Vocabulary, the workshop in Australia came to include training the communication partner in scripting and sign fluency as the model for developing language and creating a signing environment. This was done to ensure that conversational partners also learned skills that facilitated interactive communication, could be used across many situations, were easy to remember, and incorporated “a great deal of natural gesture” (Brownlie, 1999, p. 23).

With these early changes and modifications to the Makaton system of training in Australia, Makaton™ grew as an organisation and established itself in every State. There are currently qualified Key Word Sign Presenters in every state and territory and Key Word Sign organisations in Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. There are over 100 active Presenters in Victoria, over 150 active Presenters in New South Wales and dozens more in other states and

territories. Most qualified Key Word Sign Presenters are auspiced by their employers and incorporate Key Word Sign into their job role, that is, they offer in-house training and ongoing support in the use of Key Word Sign for their organisation. The more active states also have a pool of qualified Presenters who can offer generic beginners and more advanced workshops to anyone interested or who may be contracted to offer tailored workshops on a local basis to schools, early intervention programs, and adult services. State coordinators match the skills of the Presenter to the needs of the organisation and can be contacted for further information. Check the Key Word Sign Australia website for information.

#### References:

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Schaerlaekens, A., Kohnstamm, D. & Lejaegere Lisse M. (1999)  
"Streeflijstwoordenschat voor zesjarigen" (*Target vocabulary list for six year olds*)  
3<sup>rd</sup> Edition Swets & Zeitlinger

Signalong <http://www.signalong.org.uk/index.htm> accessed 11/4/2013

Vanderbeet, J, Maes, B, Lembrechts, D. & Zink, I. (2011) Expressive vocabulary acquisition in children with intellectual disability: Speech or manual sign. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 36, 91 – 104.

#### DVD/CD ROM

Actions Songs for Girls and Boys (DVD) The Variety Club of Tasmania, PO Box 893, Sandy Bay Tasmania 7005

Keys to Communication (DVD) Deakin University, Burwood Campus, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125

Let's Chat 1 (Video) Cerebral Palsy Association of Western Australia. 106 Bradford Street, Coolbinia, Western Australia 6050

Makaton Nursery Rhymes (DVD) The Variety Club of Tasmania, PO Box 893, Sandy Bay Tasmania 7005

PrAACtically Speaking (DVD) ComTEC, 705 Geelong road, Brooklyn, Victoria 3025 [www.yooralla.com.au](http://www.yooralla.com.au)

The Makaton Vocabulary – Auslan Edition (CD-ROM) Makaton Resource Centre, Special Education Centre, University of Newcastle, NSW 2308

Sign with Me: Learning Strategies for Key Word Sign (DVD) Makaton Western Australia, Disability Services Commission, A Tapestry Films Production, PO Box 43 Burswood WA 6100