Reappropriation of Gendered

Irish Sign Language in One Family[1]

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Introduction

The native vocabularies of one segment of the Dublin deaf community (i.e., primarily women over 70 and men over 55) contain different signs for the majority of common lexical items examined (LeMaster 1990). For this group of people there are mutually unintelligible *female* and *male* signs. For example, Figures 1 through 4 demonstrate the female and male signs for the common, everyday words *am, use, night, mouse*. Preliminary analyses (LeMaster 1990) suggest that these two gendered forms differ in the lexicon rather than in the grammar, yet the kinds of gender differences found in ISL are the most striking gendered language differences ever documented (see Rocherfort in Jespersen 1922, Bodine 1975, Sapir 1929, Haas 1944, Furfey 1944, Trudgill 1974, Keenan 1974). The lexical differences cannot be attributed to certain semantic domains of usage, such as ritual or specialized speech divided by gender as, for example, is found among Australian aboriginal women in mourning (Kendon 1988), or in the gender divisions of labor among the Kaluli (Scheffelin 1987) or as described by Lakoff (1975) for the American situation. Nor are the differences limited to a small percentage of vocabulary items as reported for the Carib language (by Rocherfort in Jespersen 1922).

These striking gendered language differences emerged through unique socialization experiences at the gender-segregated, residential schools for deaf children (from 1846 to 1946 for girls, and 1857 to 1959 for boys). Since these schools constituted deaf women and men's principal (and, generally first) means of language socialization, the differing lexical varieties were fundamentally established in each school. Because these schools were centralized, and run by Catholic orders (yet open to children of any faith), Irish deaf boys and girls came from throughout the Republic of Ireland, and many Catholic deaf children came from Northern Ireland to attend these schools. Ultimately, these Irish deaf children acquired uniquely distinctive signs for use according to the signer's gender.

The girls' school was begun in 1846 by Dominican Sisters who had previously gone to Caen, Normandy to

Fig. 1. Female and male forms of the word 'am'[2].

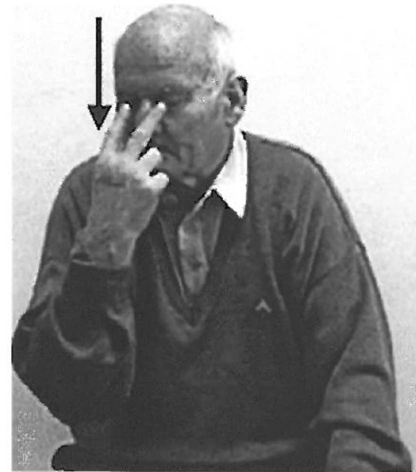

Fig. 2. Female and male forms of the word 'night.'

Fig. 3. Female and male forms of the word 'use.'

Fig. 4. Female and male forms of the word 'mouse.'

study French sign language for possible use in the Irish schools. They brought the signs home to Ireland, and with the help of Father Burke (an Irish priest), they adapted it to manually represent English. Because the famine kept the Christian Brothers busy elsewhere, it was not until nearly a decade later, in 1857, that the boys' school was started. Evidently, the school administrations had differing opinions about how to best run the schools (LeMaster forthcoming, Crean 1997) so rather than bring Dominican Sisters to the boys' school to help teach sign language, the Christian Brothers relied on the written translation of signs penned by Father Burke and the two Dominican Sisters. According to Crean (1997), the boys' school also referred to a dictionary of American signs, which had an influence on the development of the male form of signing. Notice, also, that a decade of change had already occurred at the girls' school before the boys' school even began using the adapted French signs. It is essential to point out that the borrowed and adapted signs used at the schools merged with an already existing Irish Sign Language, much in the same way as American schools' borrowing of French signs merged with existing American signing (see Woodward 1978).

It is not unusual, nor was it unusual, for Irish children to be segregated by gender in school. However, because these were *deaf* children, their *visual* proclivity for acquiring language affected them, perhaps more dramatically, than what may have happened to hearing children in similar sex-segregated schooling situations. Though the two schools for deaf children were within walking distance from one another, they were not within *visual* distance; they could not see each others' language from the school grounds (Fig. 5). Also, for a number of reasons (including that the Dominican Sisters were sequestered until the 1960s), the children did not have opportunities to interact with each other by visiting each other's campus. Even children with siblings of the opposite sex, or with deaf parents, had little opportunity to interact with each other since the schools did not allow the children to visit each other, or travel away from school property, except for infrequent visits home or to town. In poor Ireland, residential deaf children went home infrequently, and

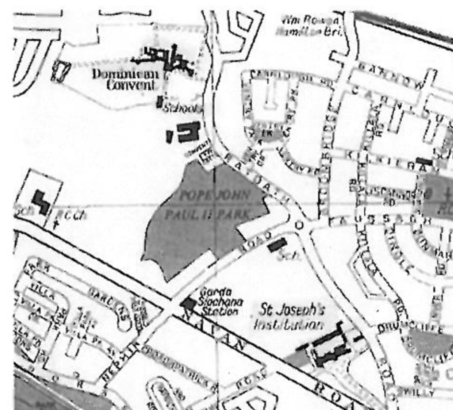

Fig. 5. Map of the two gender-segregated Irish deaf schools in Dublin, St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys. They are about 1/2 mile apart from each other.

when they arrived home, few family members knew sign language. (Most deaf children are born into families with no history of deafness.) In short, these children's residential school experience was akin to growing up on separate islands, where although the languages may have started out the same, after (roughly) 100 years of use, they had undergone dramatic lexical form diversification through normal language change mechanisms for historically separated languages.

Once these children graduated from their respective schools, they wanted to interact with each other – as most young heterosexual adults will do. Even though they had separate clubs, one for Deaf women and another for Deaf men, they would meet on O'Connell Street in the heart of Dublin city. Initially, their dialects were mutually unintelligible. For example, some of the male and female signs were virtually identical in form but differed in meaning, such as the female sign for 'red' and the male sign for 'brown,' or the female sign for 'black' and the male sign for 'night' (Fig. 6 and 7). If not identical in form, some of the signs were similar in form, but differing in meaning, causing confusion between men and women, such as the female sign for 'soldier' and the male sign for 'sister.' (Fig.8.) And for most other lexical items, the signs were just different, as figures 1 through 4 demonstrated earlier.

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Fig. 6. Female sign for 'red,' and the male sign for 'brown.'

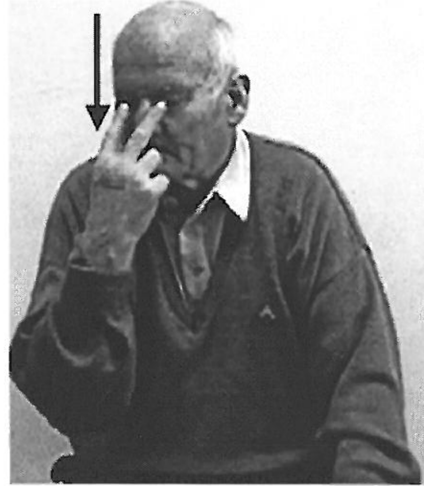

Fig. 7. Female sign for 'black,' and the male sign for 'night.'

Fig. 8. Female sign for 'soldier,' and the male sign for 'sister.'

Women and men were forced to find a resolution to their language barrier in these mixed-sex interactions. And, ultimately, they did find a solution – namely, for women to learn the male version of signing (LeMaster 1990, 1993, 1997, forthcoming), and for men to claim no knowledge of the female version of signing. The folk belief is that women have abandoned their signs in favor of the male signs. (See Table 1.) However, there are women and men who choose to live sexually segregated lives (which is certainly possible in any time, but particularly in older Ireland). In their cases, the gendered language difference was generally not a problem for them. In those few instances when they would occupy the same public space as someone from the other gender, such as at religious retreats for example, interpreters of female signs and of male signs would be provided (LeMaster 1990, and In Press). In other words, even though the folk belief holds that women no longer know or use the female form of signs, when these sexually-segregated women make public outings, other women use the female form of signs with them. Similarly, even though men claim no knowledge of female signs, when men were queried about their knowledge of female signs, their production was extremely poor, but their receptive knowledge was quite good – suggesting that the female forms of signs are still being used at some time when men can see them (LeMaster & Dwyer 1991).

There are at least three remarkable aspects of Ireland's deaf history, i.e., 1) nation-wide standardization of sign language, 2) normal language socialization experience (through the use of sign language) in residential school, and 3) high literacy skills. Those unfamiliar with deaf language studies are probably not aware that it is highly unusual for deaf people to have wide-spread standardization in sign language – especially throughout an entire country. Therefore, Ireland was remarkable in its wide-spread standardization of sign language throughout the Republic of Ireland, and within Catholic sections of Northern Ireland, (albeit, still maintaining gendered diversity). This great uniformly in sign language occurred because deaf children from throughout the Republic and many Catholic Northern Irish children attended the Dublin deaf residential schools. While the Dublin schools produced gender segregation in language, they also produced enormously standardized forms of language within gender.

What is also unique to this language situation, and another remarkable aspect of the Dublin deaf schools, is that, for about 100 years, everyone at the schools used sign language rather than spoken language of any form. While sign language has been used at other deaf schools throughout history (see Lane 1980, 1984 for example), it is unusual for hearing people at the school to sign *with each other* (LeMaster 1990, 1993, forthcoming). Generally hearing teachers at deaf schools talk to each other, and only sign with each other in the presence of deaf people, or when they think deaf people are watching/ listening. But, at the Dublin deaf schools, the hearing Dominican Sisters and Christian Brothers reportedly (LeMaster 1990, and forthcoming) did not speak to each other, but, instead, used sign language with each other. Using sign language without speaking produced the most normal language socialization experience ever reported for deaf residential schools world-wide. Using sign language without speaking (including hearing people using sign language without speaking with each other) is similar to what deaf children born to signing deaf parents report about their own language socialization experiences, namely, that they are as normal as any child born into a family with language that they can access. I cannot emphasize enough how dramatically important this fact is.

This normal language socialization experience resulted in world renown literacy abilities for Irish deaf children at the time that sign language was the medium of face-to-face communication in the schools (LeMaster 1990, 1993, forthcoming). Though this is not the focus of this paper, it is an important piece to the holistic

	Talking to Women	Talking to Men	Talking to Women & Men
Woman Signer	Form 1 or 2	Form 2	Form 2
Man Signer	Form 2	Form 2	Form 2

Table 1. Patterns of usage of the female sign (FORM 1) and male sign (FORM 2).

understanding of this groups' language abilities. While throughout most of the world, and even in the United States, deaf children leave the equivalent of high school with a third to fourth grade reading level, these Irish deaf children (now, 55 and above for men, and 70 and above for women) were equal to their hearing peers' literacy abilities, if not better. I have argued elsewhere (LeMaster 1990, & forthcoming) that this is, in large part, due to their very normal language socialization experience, and their use of visual language (i.e., Irish Sign Language) as a medium through which they learned written English.

The Younger Generation: Losing touch with their linguistic history

In 1946, the girls' school implemented oralism (a method of lip-reading and speaking) as the main channel of communication. The boys' school followed this in 1957, but were not as strict about using oralism (to the exclusion of sign language) as was the girls' school. Some teachers at the boys' school were still observed using some signing (outside of the classroom with oral deaf children) as late as 1986 (LeMaster forthcoming). The effect of the school language policy change on the community (from sign language to oralism) was dramatic. The children leaving the oral schools relied heavily on lip-reading and speaking, assisting their speech largely with signs they invented while covertly using sign in schools, or acquired through largely forbidden sign language networks. During this transitional period from the use of sign language to the use of oralism, deaf oral women were marrying deaf signing men who used no lip movements nor spoke. Leaders at the Deaf club (the central political centre for deaf people) were generally signers who used no lip movement nor speech, yet who made speeches (in sign) to a younger generation who (generally) could not follow their sign language. With the schools' language policy change to oralism, rather than a gender difference, there emerged an extreme generational difference.

Even younger people had trouble understanding each other as their sign language was so varied, and lip-reading is so unreliable. As with most oral deaf children world-wide, these Irish oral deaf children developed covert ways to use visual forms of signing. Some had networks to real sign languages. Others had to rely on their own creativity. Gestures to accompany speech, such as putting a finger against one's nose to indicate a nasal sound. So wide varieties of signing and gesture-supported speech emerged through particular dormitory friendship networks, or other networks of deaf children. However, as interesting as this is, *it is not unique to Ireland.* Instead, this is the story of oral-influenced deaf communities anywhere, a story that has been repeated for many generations in many different places around the world. This emergence of great sign variation among oral deaf children, coupled with the fact that lip-reading used for face-to-face communication is only, generally about 20 to 30% reliable, younger people had their own problems when first emerging as a cohort group from the residential deaf schools.

To summarize, what is important about this time-period in deaf Ireland is its unique gender signs, its monolingual and monomodality use of sign language in school by all people (whether hearing or deaf) creating a normalized language socialization experience for deaf children, and its production of literate graduates from residential school.

Irish Sign Language Dictionaries

Dictionaries often serve as tools of language standardization and legitimization. Ireland's sign language dictionaries have functioned in these ways. In 1979 a group of older deaf and hearing men and women convened in order to combat the problems of misunderstanding between older and younger people, and among younger people themselves. The goal of this dictionary committee was to write a sign language dictionary for younger people of what they called "proper signs" (1979, revised and reprinted in 1996). The "proper signs" were essentially those they had learned at the residential schools for the deaf. However, the main goal of the dictionary committee was to create a "unified sign language." The dictionary committee did not want the younger people to have to suffer through the gender problems that the older generation had to deal with, so the committee voted on which signs to include in the dictionary – either the male or the female form. In most cases, the male form was included. In fewer instances, the female signs were included. And beyond that, when the committee was not satisfied with an existing sign for a concept, they invented a sign for publication in the dictionary (which the community later called "new"

signs).

As might be expected, once this dictionary was published, it was largely rejected by the older members of the community because it did not represent a language they used. Instead, it was a compilation of signs from different segments of the community, put together with invented signs – as a whole, it did not represent the language used by any given segment of the community. Yet the 1979 dictionary served, and in some cases still serves (in its 1996 revised and reprinted edition), as a standardization and legitimization tool for sign language learners. The 1979 dictionary has been used in the multiply handicapped sections of the Dublin residential deaf schools. It has also been used throughout Ireland in sign language classes for hearing and deaf people. While the existing signing community largely rejected the dictionary because it did not represent language they recognized, the 1979 dictionary has had an impact on younger signers' styles and lexical choices. For example, when eliciting signs from male 20 year olds, they unwittingly used the female signs for the days of the week, 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday'. When asked why, they attributed the origin of these signs to the dictionary rather than to formerly female signs. In other words, they were unaware that these signs originated at the St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls. It is not socially acceptable for older men to use the female forms of signs, but this social rule is unknown to younger men.

In 1992 another dictionary ("Sign On") was attempted, which was to represent language varieties existing within Ireland today. While it includes some language variation, it does not specify why the variation exists (e.g., gender, region, age, etc.). And, it refers to itself as a *basic* source for signs, only including about 300 signs.

The revision of the 1979 dictionary, released in 1996, now indicates the origin of the signs, whether female or male or invented, "new," signs. This is the first time that the younger generation and non-signing hearing people have had access to their linguistic legacy. It will be interesting to track whether access to this knowledge will have any effect on the usage of these signs now currently divorced from their origins. However, the 1996 dictionary does not provide complete lists of the gendered signs, but provides a very small part of that legacy. The origin of the signs that are not listed in the dictionary are still largely unavailable to anyone other than the people who learned them in their respective schools (i.e., deaf women over 70 and deaf men over 55).

Tracking "survivals" of gendered signs

Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor developed the concept of "survivals" to help explain evolutionary processes of societies (see Garbarino 1977:31). "By survivals, Tylor meant customs or institutions that had lost their function but had been carried on into a later stage of society by force of habit" (ibid 1977:31). Borrowing Tylor's concept, we can think about tracking the "survivals" of gendered ISL in younger generations' signing to provide clues to linguistic social networks, and to help track changes in ISL over time. While gendered signs are no longer being used by younger people according to gender, the signs *are* being transmitted to future generations of signers, just not by sex or gender. Transmission of gendered signs by something other than gender raises several questions: How are the signs being transmitted from one generation to the next? Which of the gender signs are being transmitted, and what do they mean when they are being transmitted? Why are gender signs being preserved? Are they being preserved because of their gendered association with particular objects? In other words, might we be witnessing the beginning of grammatically gendered sign language, as we find with spoken languages such as French/Spanish/Italian, etc.? I am not currently trying to answer the last set of questions, but am interested in tracking "survivals" of gendered signs and understanding their current meanings to the signers who use them.

Tracking gender sign "survivals" in one deaf family

The remainder of this paper focuses on one unique deaf family at a particular point in time. This family's use of signs represents a microscopic view of language changes in the community. The father in the family attended St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys at a time that only sign language was used – he did not learn to lip-read and speak. The mother in the family attended St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls at a time that oralism without sign language was used. When she left school, she spoke and lip-read and did not use any kind of

Fig. 9. A father provides the male sign for 'yellow' while the rest of the family gives the female sign for 'yellow.'

Fig. 10. The female and male signs for the word 'yellow.'

formalized sign language.

This is a family of seven deaf people, a father, a mother, and five children. The father signs, does not speak, and travels frequently to Britain, which has had an influence on his Irish signing. The mother speaks and lip-reads, but uses the father's signs in the home with their five deaf children. The three oldest children are learning to be oral (speak without signing) at school, but use their native language, ISL, in the home with their parents and siblings. The next youngest male child has a slight additional disability. Because of his disability, he attends the multiply handicapped section of St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, and is learning to sign without speaking. This section of the school uses the 1979 dictionary of unified signing (so he mixes both female and male signs in his school dialect, and learns the male form of signing at home). The youngest male child, only 3 years old, has yet to attend school. All of the children sign at home.

In the course of asking the father to provide male ISL signs for my study, the mother and three eldest children (between the ages of 7 and 12) joined in the sign elicitation task – each demonstrating the sign they would use for each word. For example, when I asked the father for the male sign used to express the word *son* other family members showed me their sign for *son*, too.

Tracking the "survivals" of gendered ISL leads toward an understanding of current distributions and meanings of gendered sign in Ireland. When the schools no longer teach the gendered signs, yet the gendered signs continue in the sign repertoires of younger signers, it is important to understand how these signs are continuing, and what they mean to their current users. Remarkably, even though the children grew up with the male version of ISL as their first language, and use it at home with their family, there was great variation among their signs. Signs used at school came home to the family on these young hands – just in the same way that new jargon or lingo is picked up by hearing children and brought home to the family dinner table conversation. The effects of the dictionary were also present, as was a surprising distribution of female signs within a family that has no overt link to them.

Examining the explanations family members give for sign variations among them reveals the extent of understanding and knowledge about the signs' true etymologies. In an analysis of elicited sign data taken of this one family in 1986, there were two striking findings. First, gendered signs were reappropriated as "new" signs, which demonstrates the effect of the 1979 dictionary on native ISL signers in their own home. Second, female signs found their way into this home. No one in the home should have had any special knowledge of female signs other than the middle male child who attended the multihandicapped section of the school. And his knowledge would have been, presumably, limited to the dictionary offerings of female signs. The mother in the family did not use sign in school. The two girls attended the oral section of the school and are reprimanded at school for using sign language. There is not supposed to be access to female signs at either school, according to school administration and according to the community's own folk beliefs. The oral boy attends the boys' school, and is also reprimanded for signing at school. Even so, male signs are still known to be used at the boys' school, even if through covert channels. The father attended the boys' school when only signing was used, but it was the male form of signing. And the 3 year old boy is not yet in school. It was quite surprising to see the mother, father, and oldest

(oral school) brother and the daughters using several *female* signs in their signing repertoire. Surprisingly, the wife was even consulted by her husband in one case as an expert on female signs.

For analysis purposes, it is important to note that throughout the taping session, only the father was consistently present. The taping session originated by asking the father to provide male signs for a research study. The family joined in out of their own interest. The mother had demands of her off-camera, so she came and went according to the demands of the children off-screen. The three children attending the oral section of their schools (a boy and the two girls) were present most frequently throughout the taping session, but they also came and went according to their own interests. The other two boys came on screen occasionally, but not enough to be included in this analysis.

The following section analyzes the uses of gendered signs in this one elicitation session of this one deaf family in 1986, providing a representative microcosm of language change in the Irish deaf community.

Reappropriation of gendered signs as "new" signs

When eliciting the sign for 'yellow,' surprisingly, everyone gave the *female* version of the sign except for the father who provided the *male* version (Fig. 9[3]). The father commented on the other version of sign being used as the "new" sign – the one from the dictionary. The father correctly attributes the sign to the 1979 unified dictionary sign which appears for "yellow." However, he inaccurately labels the sign as a "new" sign, when, in fact, the sign comes from St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls. (See Figure 10 for the male and female versions of the sign for 'yellow.') It will be interesting to see what sign for "yellow" gets used with the next generation of signers, as the 1996 revised version of the 1979 dictionary provides an illustration of the *male* sign for "yellow," while the text calls that illustrated version the *alternate* sign. The text lists the *female* sign for "yellow" as the primary sign, and lists the etymology as coming from St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls. (Note that the videotape data of this family was taken in 1986, a decade before the revision and re-release of the 1979 dictionary in 1996.)

Similarly, when eliciting the sign for 'son,' the father provided the male version of the sign and the rest

Fig. 11. The male and female signs for 'son.'

of the family gave the *female* form of the sign. However, the 1979 dictionary version of the sign lists the *male* form of the sign. Thus, how did the mother, eldest male child, and two daughters know and use the female form? (See Figure 11 for the gender distinction.) The male and female forms of these signs look similar although there are differences in handshape, movement, and point of sign origin. The *female* sign uses a "T" handshape, straight downward movement, and starts at the forehead, while the *male* version of the sign uses a "S" handshape, a spiral movement, and starts at the mouth. (Sometimes men and women have used identical movements and point of origins, but historical processes in sign change might explain why.)

Given the slight variations in the gendered versions of the sign for "son," curiously, the difference sparked a lively discussion between the eldest son and his father. This time it was the *son* who commented on the *father's* inappropriate sign! The son first talked to me (as I was behind the camera filming them), telling me that his father was using a "new" sign. The son then tapped his father on the shoulder and told him that the sign he was using (and the son demonstrated the father's sign) was a "new" sign. The mother then tapped the son on the shoulder to get his attention to then tell him that it was okay to show me different kinds of signs. To that, the son said that they were supposed to be showing the "old" signs, not the "new" signs. From the son's admonishment, the father looked away, bewildered, muttering (in sign) to himself that he thought it was the right sign, but perhaps it was an English sign (meaning a British Sign Language sign)! All of this confusion occurred over signs that are seemingly very similar to each other. Nonetheless, the distinctions between the signs were enough to create controversy, demonstrat-

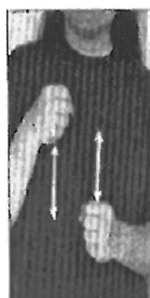

Fig. 12. Female sign for 'milk,' and dictionary (and male) sign for 'milk' (from Foran 1996:51).

ing a sensibility of variation being linked to the 1979 unified dictionary's creation of "new" signs. Yet, the father was actually using the correct *male* sign which is the sign listed in the 1979 dictionary. It was the rest of the family, who, by overt networks, should not have had access to non-dictionary *female* signs, yet, who were, in fact, using such *female* versions of sign.

Unexpected knowledge of the female signs

The 1979 dictionary has had an impact on the community, even among this family who uses ISL as their native and home language. Since, given the overt ways of acquiring gendered sign it appears that the only female signs that should be showing up in this home are the ones found in the 1979 dictionary (given that the mother attended oral school). It is quite curious to find female signs being used at all, particularly non-dictionary female signs.

Another example of this is the sign for 'girl.' The whole family provided the *male* version of the sign for 'girl,' yet since the mother was off-screen, the father provided the *female* version of the sign. He checked with his wife to make sure he was right, that the sign he was giving me was, indeed, the *female* sign from St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls. That was a curious act, since his wife attended the school during the time of oralism. Nonetheless, she was able to confirm his sign as the female sign. And, in checking the dictionary (something the Father did not use), the sign listed in the 1979 version *is* the *female* sign.[4]

When eliciting the sign for 'milk,' both the mother and father provided both the *male* and *female* versions of the sign. The 1979 dictionary only provides the *male* version. (See Figure 12 for the dictionary (or male sign) and female version of the sign for 'milk.') The mother says that either of the two signs can be used. However, many older deaf women refuse to use the sign for 'milk.' When I was eliciting signs throughout the community in the 1980s, I was repeatedly told by older women that they had no sign for 'milk.' The probable reason for this refusal stems from the men having seen their sign as "drinking milk from the breast," and made fun of them for it. The *male* sign, alternatively, takes a different iconic aspect of 'milk' in its sign production by simulating the action of "milking a cow."

The other gendered signs that the family seemed to be aware of were the signs for the days of the week. The older daughter used the *female* version of the signs. The father and son both used the *male* version of the signs. But, both the father and son demonstrated the *female* form, thereby expressing knowledge of how to produce these female signs, and knowledge that they were, indeed, female signs. Curiously, many younger people attributed their knowledge of these female signs to the 1979 dictionary (see LeMaster and Dwyer 1991, LeMaster 1993, 1996, and forthcoming). However, when checking the 1979 dictionary for these signs, I could not find any listing of them in the index, nor reference to them in text. However, they can be found in the 1996 version of the dictionary (a decade after I filmed this family). (See Fig. 13 through 17 for the female and male versions of 'Monday through Friday' and Fig. 18 for the common signs for 'Saturday' and 'Sunday'.)

MONDAY [M]
r. "G" *palm outwards,*
opposite r. shoulder:
Tap tip of index finger on
thumb.

Another sign: Slide ***r. "M"***
(thumbtip) along l. indez
finger. [J]

Fig.13. Dictionary (and female) sign for 'Monday' (Foran 1996:84); and male sign for 'Monday.'

TUESDAY [M]
r. "K" :
Tap tip of middle f. on
thumb.

Another sign: Slide ***r. "T"***
along l. middle f.
[J]

Fig. 14. Dictionary (and female) sign for 'Tuesday' (Foran 1996:84); and male sign for 'Tuesday.'

WEDNESDAY [M]
r. "Q":
Tap tip of ring f. on
thumb.

Another sign: slide ***r. "W"***
along l. ring finger
[J]

Fig. 15. Dictionary (and female) sign for 'Wednesday' (Foran 1996:84); and male sign for 'Wednesday.'

THURSDAY [M]
r. "W" :
Tap tip of little f. on
thumb.

Another sign: Slide ***r. "T"***
along l. little finger
[J]

Fig. 16. Dictionary (and female) sign for 'Thursday' (Foran 1996:84); and male sign for 'Thursday.'

FRIDAY [M]
r. "V" *palm sidewards,* at
the left of the chin:
Move the **"V"** to the other
side of the chin.

Another sign: Slide ***r. "U"***
h.d. *from right to left at the*
chin. [J]

Fig. 17. Dictionary (and female) sign for 'Friday' (Foran 1996:84); and male sign for 'Friday.'

SATURDAY
r. "S" *palm sidewards* at the chin:
Change **"S" to "5"**.

[C]

SUNDAY
r. "A" *palm sidewards:*
Bless self with tip of the thumb.

[C]

Figure 18. Dictionary (and common, or shared) signs for 'Saturday' and 'Sunday'

Reappropriation of gendered signs as "British" or foreign signs

The 1979 dictionary had an impact on this family's explanations of sign variation within their own signing styles. Interestingly, sign variations are attributed to one of two sources, either to "new" signs originating in the 1979 dictionary, or to foreign signs, particularly to British signs. It is not surprising that British signs might become a part of an Irish person's signing repertoire. There have been many ways that British Sign Language could enter into contact with ISL. Because of Ireland's close history with Britain, and because this particular family had lived in Britain and the father works frequently in Britain when there was no work in Ireland (a common practice for many Irish people), and because the British Broadcasting Communication system (BBC) shows British Sign Language in Ireland, many British signs have been adopted by Irish deaf people. Then, it is no surprise that British signs and/or reference to them would be found within the signing repertoire of this family.

Every member of the family seemed to be aware of some signs that they attributed to British Sign Language. For example, when eliciting the signs for 'mother' and 'father,' the mother in the family gave both the Irish and British signs. She explained that she taught the children to use the British signs for 'mother' and 'father' when they were young, and would teach the children the "proper" signs (meaning the ISL signs for 'mother' and 'father') when they were older.[5] Both the mother and father of this family provided British signs along side other Irish signs, thereby referencing their great familiarity with Britain and its sign language.

The children, however, were not always aware of sign origins. In one case, when asked for the sign for 'monkey,' both the older daughter and the eldest son gave the same sign, which differed from the Father's sign. The Father then explained that his children were using a British sign. He was, indeed, using the *male* sign for 'monkey' (Fig. 19).

Figure 19. Generational differences in the sign for 'monkey.' The father provides the 'male' sign, and explains his children's signs as borrowings from British Sign Language.

As Ireland has become a part of the new European Union, interacting more frequently and more intensively with other European Deaf people, it will be interesting to track how these language contact experiences affect and shape the on-going changes in the living Irish Sign Language.

Conclusion

Studying how Irish deaf women and men negotiated their language differences with each other once they left school is not only intensely interesting, but presents a new situation of gendered language where people had to consciously deal with gendered language in order to communicate with others of the opposite sex. And studying which forms remain in people's repertoires, which forms get handed down generation-to-generation, and what they mean over time, certainly fits into the interests of more recent theories in language and gender research. The more recent line of research is to focus more on interactionally produced gendered language. In other words, these researchers focus more on how gender is negotiated, emergent, performed, interacting with other dimensions of social identity (e.g., Cameron 1998, Talbot 1998, Bucholtz et. al forthcoming) than on static representations of gender.

While some researchers may immediately draw similarities between the research on gendered ISL and the "difference theorists' claims" (such as those of Maltz and Borker 1982 or Tannen 1990), the ISL situation is not the same. While it is truly the case for Dublin, Ireland's deaf signers that they grew up in gender-segregated worlds which led to the emergence of gender-segregated language, what makes this situation different from the "difference" literature, is that once these women and men had a choice, they chose to eliminate differences between them, as much as possible. And, as the story about ISL unfolds, what is even more interesting than the differences themselves is in learning how women and men managed these differences. Understanding how these gendered items emerge, contribute to gender performances, and/or merge with other dimensions of social identity is very much the interest of the "third wave" (Bucholtz et. al, forthcoming) of language and gender research.

What is important and interesting in this case study of one deaf family in one point in time is that female signs show up in unexpected places. Not only that, but within one family in which ISL is used natively, from birth, for all of the children in this family, and used as the primary language in the home, many variations in sign show up in the individual repertoires of the children and of the parents. Their own explanations for the origin of the signs create confusion in this taping session. One example for this is in the sign for *son* when the son accuses the father of using a "new" sign, when, in fact, the father was using the male sign and the son was unknowingly using the female sign. Interestingly, rather than causing confusion over meaning of this, or other sign variations used within the family, the discussions and confusions always centered around the signs' etymologies rather than their denotative meanings. Each person accused the other of using a "new" or foreign sign, when, in many cases, they were using a formerly gendered sign, either the male or female form

Studies of native signers' uses of ISL certainly provide a microcosm of a community's struggle with multiple language influences. Studying "survivals" of gendered signs in younger signer's repertoires, particularly in the repertoires of native signers, will aid our understanding of how competing variants not only coexist, but are being reshaped, or reappropriated for current-day usage. Studies such as these will aid our understanding of living, and ever-changing languages. And, in this case, it will aid our understanding of how ISL incorporates its gendered legacy, the unified signs from the 1979 dictionary, together with competing foreign variants from many sources, including from their new involvement in the European Union.

Notes

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2. Deep appreciation is extended to those who offered technical assistance for many aspects of this project, including Bob Rogers of CSULB Audio Visual Department, Walter Gajewski, Director of CSULB New Media Center, and technical assistance in drawing arrows and help with Potoshop from CSULB Academic Computing Staff technical staff, Wei-Mei Chen and Levy Chandra.

3. The faces have been obscured in an attempt to preserve some anonymity.

4. In the 1996 revision and re-release of the 1979 unified dictionary, the sign for 'girl' is the St. Joseph's

School sign. In the 1979 version it was the St. Mary's School sign.

5. Aspects of British Sign Language have been part of the Irish Deaf experience for a long time. When collecting people's stories about their early experiences with language, many Deaf people reported their family and neighbors using the two-handed British alphabet instead of the one-handed Irish fingerspelling alphabet. When asked why, no one seemed to know.

6. There is no clear author in the 1979 version. However, since Foran claims authorship in the 1996 version, and that version is a revision and re-printing of the first, I am attributing both versions to Foran. The 1996 version was reprinted in 1999.

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