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Language Contraction, Revitalization, and Irish Women

In Dublin, Ireland, the gendering of Irish Sign Language (ISL) is extreme among women born before 1931 and men born before 1946. These groups are products of two gender-segregated residential schools for the deaf. The language differences emerging from the schools were sufficiently divergent to obscure communication by gender. Yet, as adults, rather than embrace their gendered language differences, most women and men sought ways to eradicate them. Essentially the eradication process nearly eliminated the female form of signing in favor of the male form. Most people in this gendered linguistic generation have followed this cultural convention, but not everyone. This article considers individual and community language practices that challenge, and in some cases subvert, existing cultural norms of gendered linguistic behavior leading both to language contraction and to more recent attempts to revitalize the female form of ISL. [gender, Irish Sign Language, Deaf, Irish, language contraction]

Of the nearly 7,000 world languages reported on Ethnologue,[1] scholars estimate that 4,000 languages will be lost over the next 100 years. Languages become *moribund* when children no longer learn them as their mother tongue; and languages become *lost* when there are no tangible artifacts left behind (Moore in press).[2]

Deaf sign languages can easily disappear without ever having been documented. Sign languages have only recently been a subject of linguistic inquiry since the definitive work of Stokoe (1960) and Stokoe et al. (1976), and few have been studied (Nonaka 2004). As "no gaze is from nowhere" (Irvine and Gal 2000), researchers can serve to make some languages salient and render others invisible. Nonaka underscores how the focus of sign language research has been on "national sign languages of countries in North America and western Europe (e.g., American Sign Language, British Sign Language, and French Sign Language)" (2004:737). She goes on to focus the attention of researchers on "indigenous and original sign languages . . . most of which are completely undescribed, and many of which are highly endangered" (2004:737). A growing number of sign language researchers have turned their attention to indigenous/original sign languages, providing important written documentation. Some notable examples include work on sign languages in Nicaragua (Senghas, Senghas, and Pyers 2005; Senghas, Kita, and Ozyurek 2004; Senghas and Coppola 2001; Kegl 1994; Senghas and Kegl 1994; Polich 2005), among the Bedouin in the Negev desert in southern Israel (Sandler, Meir, Padden, Aronoff 2005), in a deaf village in Bali (Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1999), in a Ghanaian village (Frishberg 1987), and in communities in the Yucatan (Johnson 1991), on Martha's Vineyard (Groce 1980), in India (Jepson 1991), in Nigeria (Schmaling 2001), in Vietnam and Thailand (Woodward 2003), and elsewhere (Schmaling 2005; Van Cleve 1987).

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As sign language researchers uncover more indigenous and original sign languages, these languages become part of the linguistic map of languages worthy of research. The heightened attention to these sign languages makes possible the notion that there may be variation even among the so-called "national" sign languages. Few researchers attend to variations within "national" sign languages. Often, many variations of signing become obscured under a single label. For example, the name "Irish Sign Language" or "ISL" is often used to refer to a number of sign variations, including the ISL of Northern Ireland and the ISL of the Republic of Ireland (which differ). Sometimes signed forms of English and the indigenous sign language of the Republic of Ireland are simply called "ISL." Therefore, we might ask: Are "national" sign languages truly as unified as their labels imply; or do the labels sometimes erase potentially important sign language variations from the map of research-worthy languages or dialects?

In Dublin, Ireland, the gendering of the ISL lexicon is extreme among women born before 1931 and men born before 1946. Products of two gender-segregated residential schools for the deaf, the language differences were sufficiently divergent to obscure communication between these two groups of people. Yet, as adults, rather than embrace their gendered language differences, most women and men sought ways to eradicate them. Essentially the eradication process nearly eliminated the female form of signing in favor of the male form. Most people in this gendered linguistic generation have followed this cultural convention, but not everyone.

The Irish situation contributes to our cross-cultural knowledge of variation in sign languages, contributing to what we know to be common to sign languages more generally and what is unique to the Irish situation. We have moved beyond the early days of only looking at the effects of interlanguage contact between signed and spoken languages (Cokely and Gawlik 1974; Fischer 1978; Erting and Woodward 1979; Markowicz 1972; Markowicz and Woodward 1975; Meadow 1972; Padden and Markowicz 1975; Reilly and McIntire 1980; Stokoe 1969–70; Stokoe, Bernard, and Padden 1976; Vernon and Makowsky 1969; Woodward 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). This research joins the growing interest in research on intra–sign language variation (Aramburo 1989; Baker and Battison 1980; Boudreault 1996; Boyes-Braem 1985; De García 1995; Johnson 1991; LeMaster and Monaghan 2004; Lucas, Bayley and Valli 2001; Maxwell and Smith-Todd 1986; Metzger 2000; Monaghan 1991, 1996; Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura, and Turner 2003; Shroyer and Shroyer 1984; Winston 1999; Woodward 1972, 1976, 1978; Woodward and De Santis 1977; Woodward and Erting 1975).

Similar to spoken languages with dialects marking class, gender, and various socioeconomic and political changes within a region (Gal 1989; Irvine 1989; Jaffe 1999; Woolard 2003), what may typically be labeled as a "national" sign language may actually conflate linguistic variation. In the case of Irish Sign Language, variation by gender and age becomes prominent in language negotiations among Deaf people living in Dublin (Burns 1998; LeMaster and Foran 1987; LeMaster 2003). This gender–language situation constitutes a rare situation of language contact, involving contact between women and men of the same cultural group—a contact at the level of gender—rather than contact between speakers from two different cultural and linguistic groups. Although gender was originally the result of physical separation of populations of schoolchildren, gender became focal as the former students negotiated language differences among themselves as cohabitants of the same Deaf community (LeMaster 1990).

By the 1980s, the female form of ISL had nearly disappeared from the linguistic landscape almost without notice. Yet, with a changing political and economic landscape for Ireland, with its inclusion in the European Union, giving rise to the economically strong "Celtic Tiger," coupled with increasing attention to and institutionalized acceptance of ISL, local efforts to revitalize female ISL emerged alongside an effort to gain official status for it.

Many communities undergoing political and economic change find that "the value of community and authenticity takes on a new shape in which commodification

is central" (Budach, Roy, and Heller 2003). As ISL moved from peripheral to commodity status, female ISL moved from muted to *necessary*.[3] Bucholtz has commented on this work, saying: "The project of authentication of ISL that underwrites the language's legitimacy is bolstered by the existence of female signs, which function semiotically as emblems of the language's long-standing historical credentials and hence secure its authenticity" (2003). This article considers individual and community language practices that challenge, and in some cases subvert, existing cultural norms of gendered linguistic behavior, leading both to language contraction and to more recent attempts to revitalize the female form of ISL. Although in two cases, revival concerns the concept of female ISL more so than the ISL of the elders.

Some History: The Emergence of Gendered ISL and Contraction of the Female Dialect

Why do female signs contract in this community? As with many languages across the globe, a preference for male language emerges from gender contact.

In Dublin, Ireland, women born before 1931 and men born before 1946 acquired a gendered form of Irish Sign Language at the residential deaf schools (from 1846 to 1946 for girls, and 1857 to 1959 for boys [see Figure 1]). As reported elsewhere, Irish nuns brought French signs back from Caen and introduced them into the Irish girls' school in 1846 (LeMaster 1990, 2003). From these signs, a handwritten dictionary was created for use at the school and later use at St. Joseph's boys school, which opened some ten years later. Each campus underwent various local linguistic processes and practices that altered these signs considerably, including the development of local campus signs, influences from indigenous ISL from native Deaf signers, and influences from different foreign sign languages given the different networks of school administrators (Crean 1997; LeMaster 1990). Eventually, distinctively different lexicons emerged and became known as St. Mary's and St. Joseph's school signs. They were different enough to obscure communication between Irish teens graduating from these two schools.

Because these schools constituted deaf women and men's principal (and generally, first) means of language socialization, the differing varieties were fundamentally established in each school. Because these schools were centralized and run by

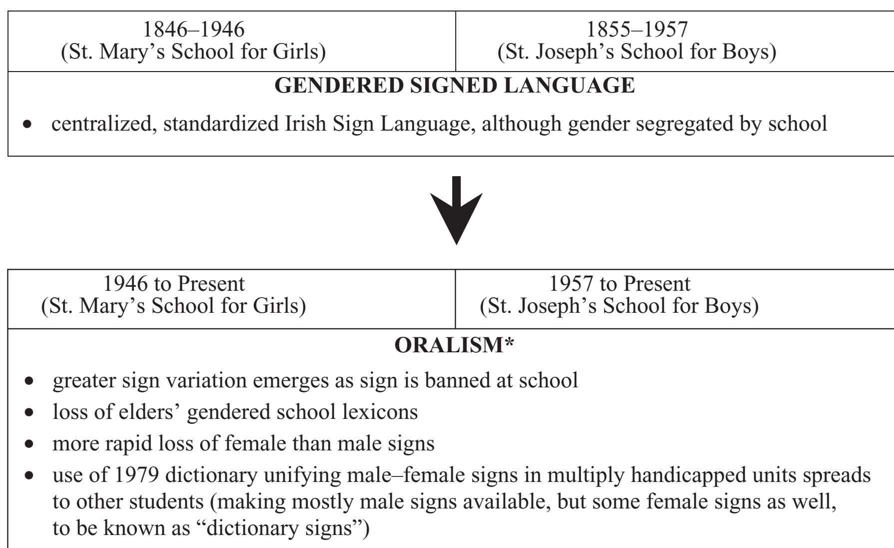

Figure 1
Language use at Irish deaf schools.

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. Ultimately, these deaf children acquired uniquely distinctive school signs (LeMaster 1990), rendering their signing mutually unintelligible, as though distinctive gendered dialects.

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 (LeMaster 1990, 2003). Though the two schools for deaf children were within walking distance from one another, they were not within *visual* distance—so they could not see each other's language from the school grounds. 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 because the schools generally did not allow the children to visit each other or travel away from school property during school time. In poor Ireland, residential deaf children went home infrequently, and when they arrived home, few family members knew sign language. (Most deaf children are born into families with no history or no immediate history of deafness.)

As reported elsewhere (LeMaster 1990, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2002; LeMaster and Dwyer 1991), adults tried to resolve their linguistic differences. Eventually women learned male signs for public sign use, reserving female signs for private use among women. Men of this generation typically use the male form with everyone. And as might be expected, the men often claim that the differences between their and the women's signs are not great and did not impair communication between them (Foran 1996[1979]; Foran, cited in Leeson and Grehan 2004). However, the women, having done the accommodation work, recognize the differences between their signs and the men's signs, noting that in the beginning they had to use their common finger-spelling system to communicate with the men through spelling words in English (Coogan, 2003; Ceci Walsh, interview by the author, 2004; LeMaster 1990). Most women use the male signs more often but have retained their female forms for use with other women in certain contexts.

So far, research has concentrated on documenting the gendered lexical differences in ISL, although recent research suggests other gendered differences as well, such as gendered hand shapes and movements[4] and possibly some discourse features among younger signers (Leeson and Saeed 2004[2002]; Leeson and Grehan 2004). What is important at this point is that the school dialects of the elders were sufficiently divergent to obscure communication between these women and men.

We might ask to what extent these forms should even be called "gendered" because they occurred through geographical separation and are really, indeed, school dialects. To what extent are they even associated with a person's gender identity? It might be fair to say that the school forms of language were simply school language until the children grew up, left school, and met people from the opposite gender who did not share their dialect. The *difference* in the way of speaking between these school-leavers became one of female versus male—and at that point gender became pivotal. And as languages sometimes become indexically linked with essential gender (Ochs 1992), these signs became linked to women and men. They are alternatively called "Cabra"[5] signs or school signs, but even these references have taken on the essentialized notion of female versus male. The easily identified differences between these gendered dialects occur in the lexicon for simple everyday signs, where there is a female and male form, such as for *girl*, *work*, and *brown* (see Figures 2–4).

Erasing Female ISL

Rather than embrace their gendered language differences and find a way to talk across their differences, male signs became the standard for the majority of interactive situations. Female signs were reserved for use by women with other women. Making the male form of signing standard had the effect of virtually erasing female signs. The erasure of female signs occurred by women ceasing to use female signs

Figure 2
Female and male signs for *girl*.

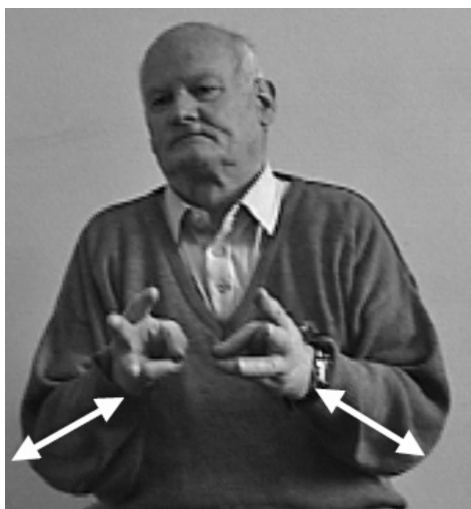

Figure 3
Female and male signs for *work*.

Figure 4
Female and male signs for *brown*.

over time. Erasure is "the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some person or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible" (Irvine and Gal 2000:38). This may be done in a number of ways—by paying attention to some features and not others, by not noticing something, by ignoring something (or trivializing it), or by actively trying to eradicate something (Judith Irvine, personal communication, 2003). In this case there was no community vote or collective action that caused the erasure of female ISL. Community pressures against the use of female signs, and in favor of the male signs, contributed to the ultimate muting of female signs in most contexts.

As found in many languages around the world, male forms of language were preferred (Borker 1980). ISL was no exception. When male and female signs came into contact outside of the residential school, some female signs came under attack by men. Women have reported being made fun of by men for their signs looking sexual, such as the signs for *milk* that iconically mimic breast-feeding and the sign for *soldier*, which would sometimes be mistaken as a sign for *breasts*.

Male devaluation of the female signs ultimately led to widespread devaluation of female ISL by both men and women. For example, in a videotaped interview, one woman talks about being ridiculed by men for her female signs. She says that she has forgotten a lot of female signs and actually "prefers" male signs over female signs. She says of male signs (translated from ISL), "They're nicer." Curiously, however, this same woman, who claims to have abandoned her female signs, interacts with other women who are monodialectal in female ISL. And during the sign interview on videotape, at the very time she says that she no longer uses female signs, she employs the female sign for *use*. In a section of the videotaped interview immediately following this segment, she uses the male sign for *use*, so it is clear that she knows both forms, and her use of the female sign in this instance was an unconscious code switch.

This woman's active resistance to the use of female signs actually bears the imprint of essentialist ideologies about language in this community. If the only true and authentic symbol of Irish deafness is to use the single male code, then her claims of doing this are undermined by her alternate use of both codes. She enacts the very hybrid identity she is denying by using female signs while claiming to use only male signs. She is also making the claim that there is no use for female "school" signs anymore, yet she undermines her own argument by using female signs in her everyday

conversations. Nonetheless, while some female signs are maintained in the everyday dialects of elder women, overwhelmingly they are disappearing from the ISL used by the "younger" generation, that is, women born after 1930 and men born after 1945.

Male Dialect

There has been greater continuity of the male signs from St. Joseph's School across generations. From the introduction of oralism in 1959 until the late 1980s, although oralism was the required mode of communication in the classroom, it was not atypical to find teachers and students signing outside of the classroom and signing among students as well. Signing on the school grounds was still a normal part of the linguistic landscape, even if it was no longer part of the official linguistic curriculum. For example, during my feasibility study in 1984–85, I met Deaf adults at the school in order to learn about gender signing. It was there that they demonstrated the different signs for me and made a videotape of their display.

By 1988, however, nearly all of the teachers who taught with sign language before oralism were transferred or otherwise left St. Joseph's School. My research has focused on former St. Joseph's students who experienced this continuity in male signs. For a short time, St. Joseph's School was nearly as strict in its oralist (exclusionary nonsigning) practices as St. Mary's. However, more recently it has welcomed signing again. In the early 2000s, it welcomed a new bi-gender ISL-only preschool run by the Irish Deaf Society. It now allows examinations to be taken in ISL. Some teachers use ISL in the classroom with students. Although these practices obviously endorse the use of ISL in school, apparently the version of ISL being used in the school does not always match that used by elder males (according to interviews with students with Deaf fathers).

One important difference between male and female sign continuity is that everyone in the community has adopted the male signs. This makes these signs more standard and more accessible to students once they leave school and interact with their elders. On the other hand, as the Deaf club becomes less central in young Deaf people's lives, it is possible that continuity in male signs may suffer a similar fate to that experienced by women's ISL.

The Younger Generation

In 1946, the girls' school implemented oralism (a method of lip-reading and speaking without the use of sign language) as the main channel of communication (see Figure 1). The boys' school followed this in 1959 but was not as strict about using oralism. Signing was still observed outside of the classroom between teachers and "oral" deaf children as late as 1986 (and is now being used again, although the signs are not necessarily native).[6] The effect of this language policy change 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 signs 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 or speech. Leaders at the Deaf club (the central political center for deaf people) were generally signers who used neither lip movement nor speech yet who made speeches (in sign) to a younger generation who could not follow their sign language. With the schools' language policy change to oralism, there emerged a marked generational difference. The distinctions shifted from a gender language difference among the elders to a sign language–oral distinction among subsequent generations. The change moved from general acceptance of signing and deafness to increasing stigmatization of both. And with this change came the rapid loss of female ISL.

With the introduction of oralism in the schools came restricted access to sign language and the beginnings of the rise of political deafness. At the same time, oralism

became associated with modernity because it is a more recent development. Signing, in general, was associated with being handicapped rather than being a normal Deaf person. Deafness itself became stigmatized societally, as Deaf people struggled to look and act "hearing." And female signs became increasingly linked to the traditional linguistic past and to deafness. Signed forms of English also were linked with the past. Signing developed at "oral" schools among "oral" students but did so covertly, with linguistic consequences.[7] Now, when elder signs continue, they are primarily male signs.

A strong generational gap has been created by the school language change to oralism, with elders signing predominantly in signed English using male signs in public and with younger people speaking and lip-reading and using a wider variety of signs emerging from covert acquisition. (There are many reports of people having been beaten in schools for signing.) Who is authentically Irish at this point? Who is authentically Deaf? Who decides? Women are clearly marginalized.

One question raised by my research and the recent research on "youthful" gendered ISL is this: "What happened to the elders' gendered ISL signs among the younger, orally educated deaf school-leavers?" By and large, it is my contention that the signs *are* being transmitted to future generations of signers but not necessarily by sex or gender or necessarily with an understanding of their gendered school origins (LeMaster 1990, 2000, 2002). One of the sources of this elder sign transmission comes from a dictionary originally published in 1979 (Foran 1996). This dictionary was created by Deaf and hearing elders, but primarily by Deaf elders for the next generation. Because of the generational differences, the Deaf elders wanted to give the younger people standard or, as they call them, "proper" ISL signs. Committee members voted on which gendered sign to include in the dictionary. The proportion of male signs is predominant. However, what is important about female signs having been included in the dictionary at all is that they became codified as part of "proper" ISL.

The use of male signs is meant to convey a unified Deaf community, making the male form unmarked. In fact, this is what the dictionary effort of 1979 was about—to codify this essentializing language practice, that is, to assert that to be Irish Deaf one needs to use a unified (standard) sign language. In this case, what became essentialized through language was not gender but deafness/Deaf identity. But initially, deaf people outside of the dictionary committee by and large did not accept this newly codified form of ISL, for no one used it in this newly created combination. This way of signing became referenced as "new signs." Yet, within a generation, this initial contention nearly evaporated as it became institutionalized as the standard of the community.

The dictionary became standard because it was the only resource for ISL at the time. It was used in the two Dublin schools' multiply handicapped units (where oralism was not used). It was the only dictionary for sign language learners for many years. As such, the female signs in this dictionary entered into everyday signing by the next generation of signers—so much so that young people lost track of the sign etymologies (LeMaster 1990, [1997]). In addition, women who attended St. Mary's School during the time of transition from signing to oralism may have acquired some of the gendered school signs and passed them on to subsequent generations. This dictionary has since been edited to show which of the signs are from St. Mary's School and which originated at St. Joseph's School, as well as which were created for the dictionary (Foran 1996[1979]). In some cases, it shows signs from both schools.

The dictionary effort of 1979 (and its reprint in 1996) did not codify community practices. Instead, it merged female and male signs by including each in the dictionary, alongside invented signs when the (female and male, deaf and hearing) dictionary committee chose not to include either gendered sign or a sign was not yet commonly used within the community. Mostly male signs made their way into the dictionary; however, the occasional female sign and the invented signs subverted cultural norms. The *intention* of the dictionary was to provide a resource to young deaf people who no longer learned sign in the residential schools and to subvert distracting gender differences in the community by unifying practices (over time). As oral schools

forbade sign language anywhere on campus except in the multihandicapped wings, "oral" deaf people developed widely varying ways of signing. The continuity from generation to generation of "oral" students was broken between generations of women, yet it was more accessible among generations of men. However, with this dictionary serving as the only dictionary on Irish Sign Language for decades, being used in the signing multiply handicapped units of the schools, by parents of deaf children, and by sign language teachers, the elders ultimately accomplished their goal to subvert differences in the community and unify practices over time. The dictionary did not replace male hegemony—but, rather, supplanted the essentialist link between women and female signs.

Change of language policy at the schools to oralism without sign language greatly affected the signing of people younger than the gendered sign users. In oral schools, children do not stop signing; they just do not generally get access to established sign languages and often invent their own systems, borrowing from whatever sign systems or languages they come in contact with. Use of the dictionary in the multihandicapped sections of the oral schools (where sign *was* permitted) has affected subsequent generations of signers, obscuring the link between gender and Irish signs. Table 1 provides an overview of the changing landscape within this community.

Changes in Recognition of Sources of Variation and Authenticity

The elders produced the 1979 dictionary for the unification of all generations of deaf people with a goal to more fairly represent the signs of the elders (to include both gendered forms of sign). However, the dictionary provided a new authority for signs—and a fractal recursion, whereby moving to a different level of categorization meant changing what differences became salient (Irvine and Gal 2000). Thereafter, the gendered signs were no longer "school signs" but "dictionary signs." And with this change, *who* could produce them with impunity also changed. However, impunity could exist only for younger people who did not acquire the gendered signs in school. For example, one elder man in the community liked certain female signs that he used on a regular basis. He was quite aware that other men ridiculed him for this and would say that he used them because he found them more aesthetically pleasing than the male signs.

The dictionary has enabled subsequent generations to use gendered signs without linking them to their gendered school origins. Any variation in the community can be met with chiding from elders, such as in one videotaped interview where men are seen laughing about someone who used a British sign when asked to model male Irish signs. Young people can view variation homogeneously as gendered, regardless of the variation's origin.

In an essay on nongendered transmission of gendered signs to children in this community (LeMaster 2002), I found, in one family, a wide variety of signs incorporated into the various individuals' linguistic repertoires, with seeming tolerance from other family members. There was evidence of gender signs being used by both the children and the parents without necessarily linking these signs to their historical school use. Sometimes any variation was assumed to have come from the school (e.g., a British sign being mistaken for a female sign). Sometimes there were arguments about the authenticity of a sign, for example, when a son accused his father of providing a "new" (hence, "dictionary") sign for the research rather than the "male" sign requested. The dad questioned his own authenticity, but rather than agree to having shown a "new" sign, he claimed that the sign must have been borrowed from British Sign Language. In reality, the boy had unwittingly shown the female sign, whereas his dad provided the male sign.

So what has happened to the female signs? If it is symbolic of an Irish Deaf identity to use male signs and to use unified dictionary signs for younger people, then what happened to the female signs? Were they completely abandoned by women in favor of male or dictionary signs?

Table 1

Timeline	Context	Language Source	Linguistic Outcome
1846–1956	St. Mary's Girls School	Caen, Normandy, France (create handwritten dictionary), plus indigenous Irish Sign Language (ISL)	Female ISL
1857–1959	St. Joseph's Boys School	Handwritten dictionary (above), indigenous ISL, foreign sign influence (Crean 1997)	Male ISL
1860s	Adult community	St. Mary's and St. Joseph's schools	Gendered ISL
1946	St. Mary's Girls School	Strictly oral	Sign variation (loss of female sign continuity)
		Multiply Handicapped Section (not allowed to interact with oral Deaf)	Continuity of female ISL
1957	St. Joseph's School	Comparatively loosely oral	Continuity of male ISL and emergent sign variation
		Multiply Handicapped Section (not allowed to interact with oral Deaf)	Continuity of male ISL
1979	St. Mary's and St. Joseph's schools' Multiply Handicapped Units (not to mix with oral students)	1979 dictionary unifying gendered ISL	Eventual standard for ISL
1988	St. Joseph's School	Strictly enforces oralism	Male ISL continuity threatened.
Late 1990s, early 2000s	St. Joseph's School	ISL allowed on campus again	Male ISL continuity, oralist variations of sign, and new versions of ISL from some hearing teachers and others

The majority of women born during or before 1930 still know the female signs. There are women in this age group who do not interact frequently with men, who only use the female form of sign. Bi-dialectal women use female signs with monodialectal women. The norm is to not use female signs with men or with women who do not know them. And this norm is so well adhered to that those who are not supposed to see these signs often do not.

Not all women follow the code-switching dictum. In fact, what made one woman seem so authentically female is that she defied community code-switching norms. She was recommended by many in the community as one of the best examples of a user of female signs. However, she did not use female signs in all of her communications with others but, rather, used a *mixture* of female and male signs without code-switching situationally. She became an authentic symbol of female signing by refusing to follow code-switching norms. When asked, she simply said that she uses the signs she likes and does not feel the need to change them for anyone.

Commodification of ISL

So many changes have occurred in Ireland, especially in the last two decades with Ireland's admittance to the European Union and its recent economic success. Concurrently, Deaf people have challenged hearing authority over their language and community in a number of ways (see LeMaster 2003). Through global efforts to establish Deaf authority in Ireland with a grassroots Deaf organizational membership in international fora such as the World Federation of the Deaf and the European Union Deaf organization, the Irish Deaf Society gained internal recognition from the Irish government—thereby supplanting, in some important ways, the hearing-run deaf organizations such as the National Association of Deaf People in Ireland (LeMaster 2003). With this global and local recognition, Deaf Irish people have been able to establish a program of study at Trinity College Dublin—the Centre for Deaf Studies. They have also established a new preschool where Deaf teachers use ISL and are now actively lobbying to get recognition of ISL as the official language of Irish deaf children. This new positioning of ISL and Deaf authority in Ireland brings with it a *commodification* of ISL and deafness whereby the language of Deaf people, ISL, has become valuable. There is a need for teachers of the language, for interpreters, for research. Signers and signing have become valuable, which raises questions: "Who is authentically Deaf?" "Which is the right ISL?" and "Who decides?" Not elder women at this point. Their signing is still viewed as old-fashioned and nearly extinct. But there is a rise in Deaf authority along with the commodification of deafness and sign language.

Perhaps the primary political struggle of the moment is to get recognition of ISL as the legitimate first language of all Irish Deaf people. ISL is used in the Republic of Ireland. It is also used in Northern Ireland alongside a version of British Sign Language sometimes called "ISL," "Ulster signing," "Northern ISL," and "Northern British Sign Language." Because the ISL of the Republic of Ireland is also used in Northern Ireland (primarily because of many Catholic deaf children having attended the Cabra schools in Dublin and then returning home), the labels for sign varieties in Northern Ireland can become confusing to those unfamiliar with local understandings of sign variation and local labeling. The signing used in Northern Ireland, also called ISL, was recently accepted as the official language of Deaf people there. However, ISL has yet to be similarly recognized in the Republic of Ireland.

In summer 2004 there were many cross-border discussions among Deaf leaders about how to label their sign languages. One in particular was the discussion about who has the right to claim that their sign language is "Irish Sign Language." Two language committees have recently been formed to protect the purity of ISL. Language purification committees were established both in Dublin and in Belfast in order to safeguard their languages. Both women and men are on both committees. Though there are two women on the Dublin committee, neither is from the time of signing at St. Mary's School. It was agreed that the Dublin committee would address variations in the ISL used within the republic and across the border in Northern Ireland. The committee in Northern Ireland would address the variations of the northern version of the ISL that differs from the Republic's ISL, and the two committees would continue to collaborate in terms of relevant cross-border linguistic issues.

These discussions of labels for standard sign languages in the Irelands have raised several issues. As noted, questions were raised about who is authentically Deaf, which ISL, and who decides.

Female ISL Revitalization

The revival of the women's signs is co-occurring with the increased legitimation and commodification of ISL. Since the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin in fall 2000, there has been a lot of discussion about the process of language domination, especially as it concerns the loss of female signs in the younger generations. With this come three recent attempts to reclaim or to "unerase" female ISL.

One such attempt is a somewhat covert activity by Deaf gay men who use what they call "female signs" among themselves (Senan Dunne, personal communication, 2004). But rather than use the old St. Mary's signs, they are using oral women's signing styles. Little is known about this, other than the expression of interest in the reappropriation of female ISL.

A second attempt to revitalize female ISL comes from local research interests in gendered ISL. There is a recent essay that refutes the claim of diminishing female signs among the younger population, citing several grammatical structures linked to female and male signers (Leeson and Grehan 2004). The differences noted are prototypical topic constructions with head tilted back, eyebrows raised, and a head nod by Deaf men aged 25–35, with women using raised eyebrows with an eyeblink to mark the offset of a topic. Also, women tend to use simultaneous constructions more often than men (Lorraine Leeson, personal communication, 2004). Leeson and Grehan (2004) suggest that younger female signs are standardized—that they are being handed down from generation to generation. The question is whether the female forms are the same as those of the elders. Leeson and Grehan describe the relationship between the younger signers' gendered ISL and that of their elders:

> The lexemes that we are specifically referring to here were generated by generations of Irish school girls while they attended St. Mary's School for Hearing Impaired Girls in Dublin, but unlike the lexical items referred to in the work of Le Master and Le Master and Dwyer, these items did not disappear nor do they seem to have a corollary in generation. Instead, and particularly strikingly, these signs seem to have been passed from generation to generation and appear to have become standardised: female informants from the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College discussion group ranged in age from their very early twenties to their late fifties and all agreed that they both understood and used many of these complex signs in communication. Naturally, there are some signs in this group associated with older women, normally those aged forty years and above, but the point here is that younger female signers currently have access to these forms, and frequently, we note that where one form is associated with older groups of signers, a related form has developed for younger signers.[2004:44]

Leeson and Grehan (2004) and Leonard (n.d.) note the ease with which women and men understand younger female and male signers' gendered signs, respectively. Leonard states: "For signs considered to be 'younger' or used by Deaf women aged 30–40, there is a high rate of recognition among both genders and this shows that mutual unintelligibility on these signs at least does not seem to be a problem for female and male signers" (n.d.:13).

The local Irish work on gendered ISL to date considers signers through the age of 60 or 65. The elder women who learned female ISL signs in school are 75 years old or older, and men are ages 60 and older. There appears to be a generational gap between women born in 1930 or earlier and those born after 1930. Because men's signs have continued to be used in the community, there does not appear to be as much of a break between the men's signing and more youthful versions (other than what might be expected generationally in any language).

Although the younger generation may very well maintain gendered forms of signing, these forms appear to be distinctively different from the elders' signs. As one

woman born in 1963 noted: "There seems to be a break in the transmissions of signs among women; but not so among men." Among her cohort she noticed continuity in their ISL production; but between her cohort and elder women she noted a decided difference.

Two of the three revitalization efforts have served to revive the *concept* of gendered signs rather than the actual female signs of the elders. In a sense, gay men and younger women are "unerasing" the stigmatized notion of female signs, but the actual female signs from St. Mary's School are not what these younger people are reviving. What is becoming "unerased" in these first two examples with respect to female signs is the concept of femaleness in ISL. What is now attracting the attention of researchers with regard to female signs concerns the signing styles of younger women.

The third attempt at revitalization of the elders' female ISL comes from a group of women who attended St. Mary's School at the time of the changeover from sign to oralism (in 1946). They make up what I call a "transitional" group—women who learned some of the female signs when attending St. Mary's School. Among these women are several semisigners (akin to Dorian's semispeakers) in the female version of ISL. Most of the women involved in the revitalization effort have been university students whose own research focused on elder women's ISL. In the case of this group alone, they are trying to revive the original elders' female from of ISL.

These women are attempting to revitalize the female signs and to subvert the view of male signs as neutral and normative ISL. Their movement is to encourage all women to learn the former St. Mary's signs and to take them back and use them as their own for all communication, whether with men or with women. This is a very recent movement, and given that there is not yet any dictionary or other preservation of female signs, this goal may be difficult to achieve in the near future.

Yet what is different now with the use of female signs is that people are starting to use them to display gender, whereas before, they were used as a mode of communication more than as a political statement. The recent research, gay men's use of female signs, and the revitalization movement are all playing against previous essentialist definitions of language, making them their own.

Conclusion

There are many sign variations in Irish Sign Language that are not experiencing any particular interest. There are regional variations, borrowed signs, differences in ISL production by generation, and various contact effects from other signed languages. Yet the gendered signs are attracting the most interest at the moment. Perhaps this is happening now as Deaf people have increasing authority over definitions of themselves. They have a new academic, economic, and political authority that enables them to define themselves, Deafness, and ISL. The struggles are politicized, being played out both within the community, subverting community norms, and in front of a wider society as symbolic of an Irish Deaf identity that is self-defined in the context of the community's history and with consideration of the legitimacy of ISL.

Generation and gender raise problematic issues in the increasing politicization and negotiation of ISL. Elders are viewed as old-fashioned, with the female form of sign in jeopardy. Younger signers are viewed as using "modern ISL."

One of the most important community struggles occurring right now in the Republic of Ireland is the movement to get the government to recognize ISL as the legitimate first language of Irish Deaf people. Variation in ISL can threaten this movement by weakening the argument that ISL is *one language* shared by all Irish Deaf people. At the moment, female signing is nonthreatening in the push for acceptance of ISL. But with the potential for it to become visible, and perhaps even highly visible, women may be held responsible for any perceived lack of unity from the outside. In other words, how can female ISL be endangered, yet ISL be lobbied as the natural official language of Deaf Irish people?

To accept female signs as ISL, several things would have to also be accepted:

- elders as authentic Irish Deaf people; younger generation as less authentic
- foreign research as a cornerstone to Irish authenticity
- women as central to authentic ISL

Although not representing a modern ISL, the female signs do function as emblems of the language's long-standing historical credentials and bolster its authenticity as a viable first language of a group of Irish people. Revitalizing the *concept* the female signs or the actual elder ISL is not only possible now but also necessary. It no longer threatens the viability of ISL but, in fact, achieves the opposite: It provides historical credentials to secure its authenticity.

Notes

1. www.ethnolgue.com, accessed April 4, 2005.
2. www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-grps.html # Endangered, accessed April 4, 2005.
3. In her comments as discussant to an American Anthropological Association session, Mary Bucholtz (2003) suggested that it was not only *possible* for women's signs to be accepted but *necessary*.
4. This research was supported, in part, through a National Science Foundation Grant (0318498).
5. Cabra is the name of the residential neighborhood where the schools are located.
6. For information on the Irish Deaf community and ISL, see also Burns 1998; Crean 1997; Leeson in press; LeMaster 1990; Matthews 1996a, 1996b; McDonnell 1996a, 1996b, 1997; McDonnell and Saunders 1993; Ó Baoill and Matthews 2000.
7. For a discussion of forbidden signing in the United States, see Baynton 1996.

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