

a lingua franca elsewhere. There are a number of reasons for this. ASL is the language of the world's largest organized Deaf community, and many Deaf people from throughout the world come to visit the United States. Also, Americans did much of the earliest research on sign languages and deaf communities making information about ASL available worldwide. Furthermore, there has been prolonged and extensive contact among American deaf people and deaf people from many other nations throughout the world. Prolonged and extensive contact with ASL by international deaf people can lead to adoption of ASL as a second language, and familiarity with American Deaf culture by non-American Deaf people. It also can lead to contact varieties of sign languages. ASL has also had a heavy influence on the educational language in many countries outside of the USA through exportation by missionaries and others, or through importation by local educators. For example, some Nigerian deaf schools use ASL in the classroom (Schmaling 2003), and some deaf Thai schools use an ASL-influenced version of their local sign language (Woodward 2003).

Signed and Spoken Languages

Another myth about sign languages is that they are the same language as the spoken language of their broader community, just done on the hands and face. This is not true. Actual sign languages have grammars that differ markedly from spoken languages in contact with them. In fact, countries which use (essentially) the same spoken language do not necessarily have mutually intelligible sign languages. The sign languages used in the United States, England, and the Republic of Ireland, for example, are quite different from each other. Sign languages do not develop according to the grammatical rules of the spoken languages of their communities. Instead, they have their own complex morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantic rules which sometimes differ markedly from the grammars of spoken languages with which they are in contact.

What complicates recognition of sign languages as wholly different from spoken languages are the kinds of contact signing that emerge as a direct result of the intense contact between signed and spoken languages within a given community. Signers represent a linguistic minority in a sea of spoken language users. Furthermore, the majority of deaf children (90 percent) are born into hearing homes with no history of deafness (Schein and Delk 1974). Therefore, the majority of deaf children are continually surrounded by spoken language from birth, and may not even be exposed to sign language during their period of first language acquisition.

Contact sign languages emerge in many situations where sign languages come into contact with spoken languages, or where two or more signed languages are in close contact with each other. The languages influence each other, producing a contact form of language.²

An example of language contact between English and ASL can be found in the directional ASL sign that encodes the subject and object of the verb, as in "I-SEE-You." A signer, particularly one for whom English is a first language, may

use this directional verb to simply mean "SEE," without being aware of the ASL grammatical rule which encodes (in this case) both subject and object in the direction of the verb. Since encoding this information by the use of movement and /or hand-shape is foreign to English grammar, novice contact signers may not know that the subject and object have already been encoded. Instead, they rely on English grammar and make sure they provide a separate sign for each separate English word, "I" "see" "You." This contact version of "I see you" ends up being signed as "I I-SEE-you you." Inadvertently the subject and object are repeated because English requires the statement of subject and object as separate nouns, while ASL embeds them in the placement of the directional verb. The English – ASL contact version borrows legitimate signs from ASL but adapts them in a peculiar way to suit the foreign grammar of the spoken language, which is English in this case.

The amount of influence spoken languages have on signed languages varies, but because sign languages coexist in the midst of larger spoken language communities, many deaf people's signing shows influence of spoken languages at some point. Contact signing arising from the interaction between ASL and English has features including ASL and ASL-like signs, some English mouthing and occasional spoken words, and reduced ASL and English morphology and syntax. Mouthing is particularly influential in some varieties of sign languages in countries where oral education (where children were expected to learn to lipread or speechread and speak rather than sign) is, or was, prevalent, including Germany, England, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

Given that contact sign languages coexist with existing sign languages, the linguistic boundaries between them may become erased³ as they often coexist under the name of the existing sign language. For instance, when the term "ASL" is used for sign language classes it is often unclear whether unmixed American Sign Language or some contact form of ASL mixed with English will actually be taught in the class. The mere fact of producing language in a signed form makes it difficult for non-linguists to separate contact forms of sign languages from the sign languages themselves.

In short, the relationship between signed and spoken languages within a given deaf community is essentially twofold. Between the actual languages, there is no inherent relationship. They are generally wholly separate languages with unique grammars, and unique historical origins with respect to one another. On the other hand, within contact forms of signing, the relationship is intertwined. The contact signing represents the often intense relationship between the two languages, and the minority/majority status of sign *vis-à-vis* spoken language. The result of this is a hybrid communication system similar to pidginization, borrowings, and other contact language processes.

[...]

Conclusion

In this chapter, sign languages have been seen as entities unto themselves and as languages used by d/Deaf people. As languages are the reflection of how groups of

people communicate, we can also see that when we talk generally about sign languages, we are talking about individual, cultural, and society-level issues.

Although some people still have the misunderstanding that a given sign language is universal, sign languages, like spoken languages, are in fact local phenomena. All groups have their own distinctive ways of using sign language and when groups are cut off from each other, the languages will differ. International sign languages are the function of international communities agreeing on a common system like Gestuno, using a common language like American Sign Language, or developing new ways of communicating face to face despite different national origins and linguistic differences. Sign languages develop wherever there is a group of people who need to communicate by visual means. Not all people with hearing loss, however, use sign languages.

In sociolinguistics, researchers study the effects that social characteristics such as region, age, gender, and social status have on language variation, paying attention to statistically significant or otherwise quantifiable variations of language used within particular populations. In linguistic anthropology, on the other hand, while researchers are also interested in studying the effects of these social characteristics on language variation, their attention is less on small parsings of variation across a wide spectrum of language users, and more on deep descriptions of holistic samplings of variations embedded within a particular culture. Linguistic anthropologists are interested in how languages contribute to the emergence and maintenance, or loss, of cultures. They study language socialization, and the range of linguistic variation within a given population (perhaps within one individual, or one family, or one community). They track developments of culture and language across time. The sections in this chapter on home signing, literacy and deafness, and contact language focus on how deaf people have gained access to the dominant (spoken) language around them.

What the societal and individual ramifications of sign languages have in common is that variation is always a key to understanding developing patterns within deaf communities. Characteristics of sign language users will be reflected in their language and signers will build upon these particularities to create cultures of their own. Variations between individuals and larger societies have profound implications for educational and governmental policies. Although documenting the lives of d/Deaf individuals and d/Deaf communities is just one part of the much larger process of the recognition of the rights of all deaf people, it is a process that allows communities to see where they have come from and where they might like to go.

Notes

1. Even signs that are iconic representations of the same object, such as "tree," can differ between languages: see Klima and Bellugi 1979.
2. Some sign language scholars have called this kind of language mixing Pidgin Sign English or PSE, arguing that the mixing between English and ASL is similar to what occurs among pidgins or trade languages where pieces of each language are merged for common use

(Fischer 1975, 1978; Woodward 1973a, 1973b). Yet, in the case of language varieties emerging from contact between signed and spoken languages, generally signers employ spoken language grammar while using sign vocabulary often devoid of grammatical markings and conceptually inappropriate. More recently, this kind of language mixing has been called "contact signing" (Lucas and Valli 1992) which is more consistent with current understandings of pidgin and creole languages today.

3. See Irvine and Gal 2000 for the concept of erasure.

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