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Abstract:	This dialogue addresses practices of delineation and linguistic differentiation within sign language sociolinguistics, and covers the authors' experiences of delimiting sign language varieties in different contexts. The authors review efforts to use lexical comparison for determining the relationship between sign language varieties, and highlight the importance of analysing the ideologies in signing communities themselves. Their discussion includes the (often controversial) examples of sign language varieties in Indonesia, grouping BSL-influenced languages together as BANZSL (British, Australian, and New Zealand Sign Language), and the naming of ASL-influenced sign languages used outside of the US.

Lumping and splitting: Sign language delineation and ideologies of linguistic differentiation

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The terms 'lumper' and 'splitter' have long been used to describe opposing approaches to taxonomy in various fields, such as ethnobiology: on encountering a set of closely related species, splitters name a greater number of distinctions in the set than lumpers (Berlin et al. 1981). Linguists use these terms to describe contrasting tendencies among those documenting and delineating languages (Heine and Nurse, 2000: 3): the splitter typically regards varieties as distinct languages, while the lumper tends to treat those varieties as, for example, dialects of the same language.

But splitting and lumping are tendencies that lie on the surface and refer to deeper, underlying issues. As with spoken languages, the discourse on delineating and naming signed languages is flavoured by a fundamental quandary: multiple types of linguistic evidence provide few definitive or 'objective' answers to thorny questions about where one language finishes and another one starts, which are often informed by language ideologies and settled in socio-political contexts. Such questions are confounded by the ongoing lack of available definitions around terms as basic and fundamental as 'language' (Cysouw and Good, 2013).

Attempts to understand the relationships between sign language varieties have focussed mostly on lexical comparison (e.g., Woodward, 1993, 2000, 2011; Guerra Currie et al., 2002; Johnston, 2003; Al-Fityani and Padden, 2010). These have been informed in different ways by classical lexicostatistics methods used in historical linguistics, which entail comparing the lexica of historically-related language varieties to ascertain how many pairs of items from a fixed word list are cognates (the most famous proponent being Swadesh, 1950, 1954, 1955). The challenges of applying this method to sign languages are well-known (e.g. Woll, Sutton-Spence and Elton, 2001; Meir and Sandler, 2008) and include the confounding effects of iconicity (two forms may be identical not because of language contact but because both have independently developed similar patterns of iconicity based on salient visual properties of a referent) and issues deriving from elicitation and sampling procedures (Palfreyman, 2014).

Language naming, however, takes place in socio-political contexts that are informed and shaped by ideological factors. To give but an example, Zeshan (2000) concludes that varieties used in Karachi (Pakistan) and New Delhi (India) are close enough to warrant referring to both as 'Indopakistan Sign Language', but political sensitivities dictate common reference to two national sign languages, Indian Sign Language and Pakistani Sign Language. Political sensitivities can also change over time. In the case of Belgium, for example, what was once upon a time referred to as 'Belgian Sign Language' (Loncke, 1986) is now two languages – Flemish Sign Language in Flanders and French-Belgian Sign Language in Wallonia – and the influence of nationalist and identity discourses can be detected here (De Meulder and Haesenne, 2019).

If anything, the business of sign language naming is arguably becoming more, not less complicated, and for several reasons. Early research on sign languages was very much centred on national sign languages. Names such as American Sign Language (Stokoe, 1960) and British Sign Language (Cicourel, 1974; Brennan, 1975) aligned sign languages with national borders. As more signed languages became documented, it became clear that they did not always align with national borders – Canada, for example, now has at least four named sign languages: American

Sign Language, Langue des Signes Québécoise, Inuit Sign Language and Maritime Sign Language (Snoddon and Wilkinson 2019). Similarly, it has become increasingly important to recognise that Auslan is just one sign language of Australia, as understanding grows of both other settler sign languages such as Australian Irish Sign Language (Adam, 2012) and indigenous sign languages (including Yolngu Sign Language, see Bauer, 2014, and Kendon, 1989).

More recently, there has been a surge of interest in rural sign languages (Zeshan and de Vos, 2012; de Vos and Nyst, 2018; Le Guen, Safar and Coppola, 2021) creating uncertainty, in some cases, about how these are best delineated. Branson, Miller and Marsaja (1999) noted that there can be whole regions with high rates of deafness and wide use of gesture, but when researchers happen to encounter one village in such a region, they delineate and name a village sign language without taking the wider region into account. Several varieties documented in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, for example, have received different treatment and terminology by Shuman (1980), Johnson (1991), Escobedo Delgado (2012) and Le Guen (2012). These varieties – to which Safar and Le Guen (2021) refer with intentional ambiguity as 'Yucatec Maya Sign Language(s)' – have not been in contact historically, but are mutually intelligible to a certain extent, as a result of lexical and grammatical similarities deriving in part from a shared gestural and cultural background (see 'Classifications and Typologies: Labeling sign languages and signing communities', this issue, for discussion on distinctions between language and non-language). Work by Hou (2016) and Reed (2019) also challenges our assumptions about distinctions between individual home sign systems and community sign languages. Reed (2019) shows how 12 deaf signers in the Bebilyer/Kaugel region of rural Papua New Guinea constitute an intermediary 'sign network' of weak social ties between individuals in a larger region.

Palfreyman (2019) argues that sociolinguists should integrate the perspectives of sign community members, though there is of course no guarantee that these will coincide. For example, there has been some discussion online about the appropriateness of 'BSL'. In particular, the Northern Ireland variety is perceived by some as being lexically distinct from varieties used in Britain, and the acronym 'NISL' has been proposed. Deaf people who support Scottish independence wonder if the term will be replaced by Scottish Sign Language in the future. Dialogue on language delineation can be informed by approaches including linguistic typology, variationist sociolinguistics, perceptual dialectology, studies of (c)overt statements related to linguistic identity (as in Palfreyman, 2020), and building the metalinguistic awareness of language users is of considerable importance.

Of course, local language naming practices are also situational, rather than homogeneous, or static. Kusters (p.c. 8/3/21) points out that, in one context, 'Indian Sign Language' is used, while for bible translations, 'Keralan Sign Language' is named as a separate sign language, rather than Indian Sign Language (Kerala is a state in the south of India). A further example is that of Scottish variants of BSL: a sub-set of lexical signs associated with the Catholic deaf school St. Vincent's, in Glasgow, was influenced by Irish Sign Language. Those signs are sometimes referred to as '(Scottish) BSL', while at other times as 'Catholic signs' *as opposed to* (Scottish) BSL.

One of the challenges associated with language delineation is the need to deal with sign language varieties that have been influenced by American Sign Language, introduced in various forms through missionary activities, education and international development projects to countries in Africa, Asia and South America (Kusters, forthcoming). In West Africa, for example, many national sign languages show extensive lexical influence from ASL. Nyst (2012: 410-11) refers to these as ASL-based sign languages, but notes that forms of ASL were introduced from the 1950s, 'with limited access to native performance', with influence from signs of a local origin, such as conventionalised forms in the gesturebund (Nyst and Martins, 2020). In her discussion of 'ASL-

based' and 'ASL-influenced' sign languages, Kusters (forthcoming) notes how some Nigerian scholars foreground the influence of forms of ASL, referring to Nigerian-American Sign Language, while Asonye, Emma-Asonye and Edward (2018) seek to resist this kind of affiliation with ASL. Documentation of signed languages in the Pacific region, such as those used in urban centres in Papua New Guinea and in Fiji, also is providing evidence of the influence of Auslan and Australasian Signed English on these varieties.

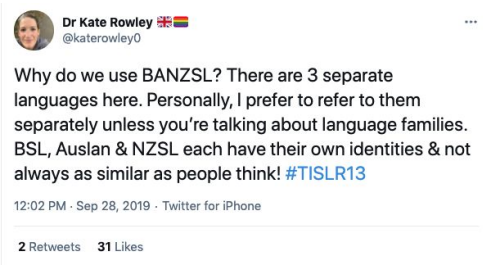
Another challenge is the complexity of language contact between signed and spoken languages. The term 'contact signing' was first proposed by the sociolinguists Lucas and Valli (1992) to refer to varieties of ASL that show varying degrees of English influence. It has been adopted in academia, but sits alongside terms such as 'Pidgin Sign English' (PSE) which are still widely used in the ASL sign community (see 'Geographies and Circulations: Sign language contact at the peripheries', this issue). In the UK, a range of varieties resulting from contact between English and BSL are grouped together as 'Sign Supported English' (SSE). The ways in which language ideologies and attitudes shape the perceptions of signers towards differences between signed languages and English-influenced signed varieties are only beginning to be documented (Hill, 2012; Rowley, Fenlon and Cormier, 2018), but it is clear that such distinctions are important. This undoubtedly reflects existing power disparities between English and these signed languages, disparities that have limited many deaf adult's access to ASL and BSL while emphasising varieties of English either in signed or spoken form (De Meulder et al., 2019).

As researchers – a deaf British linguist (Palfreyman) and a hearing Australian linguist (Schembri) – we have both been inspired by the variation found within and between sign languages. Neither of us would characterise ourselves as 'lumper' or 'splitter', yet we have both encountered lumper-splitter issues as we have engaged with sign community members. Schembri and colleagues have conducted several studies drawing on data from Auslan, British Sign Language (BSL) and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) (e.g., Schembri et al., 2009; McKee et al., 2011; Fenlon et al., 2018). Traditionally, varieties known to be historically related that have a high degree of mutual intelligibility are considered 'dialects' of the same 'language'. Thus, the high degree of lexical overlap reported between BSL, Auslan, and NZSL led Johnston (2003) to claim that these three were best considered a single language, which he suggested could be referred to as 'BANZSL' (British-Australian-New Zealand Sign Language).

The names 'American Sign Language', 'Auslan', and 'British Sign Language' were bestowed by hearing linguists. In the case of Auslan there was discussion with a small number of deaf community members about the proposed name in the early 1980s, but to our knowledge there was no wider debate – at least partly because, at the time, the notion of sign languages as bona fide languages was as novel to deaf signers as to everyone else (e.g., Maher, 1996). A growing awareness of positionality has led to reflections on the influence exerted by linguists and sociolinguists, hearing and deaf (Hochgesang and Palfreyman, in press). Schembri has become acutely aware of this since the publication of his textbook on Auslan linguistics with Trevor Johnston (Johnston and Schembri, 2007): terminology proposed for the description of the language has become widespread in Auslan classrooms across the country over the last decade and a half. Furthermore, the day the Auslan dictionary was launched (13 April 1989) has been proposed as 'Auslan Day' in Australia to be marked every year. It is all very well adding disclaimers ('in no instance should our usage be taken as implying a particular political stance', Comrie et al., 2013) but linguists *do* have influence, should recognise this, and must respond to these dilemmas with great care and sensitivity (Palfreyman and de Vos, in press).

The case of the term BANZSL is a good illustration of this. Although first introduced by Johnston (2003) as an additional term to refer to this family of related varieties, and not to replace the

terms 'BSL, 'NZSL' or 'Auslan' (the latter of which was coined by Johnston himself – see Johnston, 1989), it was later used by some researchers, including Schembri, as a means to refer to shared features of all three varieties (e.g., when discussing their shared fingerspelling system, see Cormier, Schembri and Tyrone, 2008). None of these authors anticipated that the term would take on a life of its own, to the extent that it now has an entry in Wikipedia. There has been pushback from some deaf academics, however, because of feeling that this term emphasises the similarities at the expense of important differences, and erases the unique history and complexities of each variety (see for example the following tweet, Rowley, 2019).



Most of Palfreyman's work addresses sign language varieties in Indonesia and those who use them; in 2010, at the outset of his research, those varieties had not yet been named in the literature, although there were plenty of views within the sign community regarding naming (Palfreyman, 2019). He has since observed and participated in that discourse, which at the time of writing is ongoing. Another indirect participant in that discourse is Woodward who, in his work on sign language varieties in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, has been a splitter.

Given the introduction of ASL signs to Thailand in the 1950s, Woodward (1996) redesignates Thai Sign Language as 'Modern Standard Thai Sign Language' (MSTSL). He then names 'Original Chiangmai Sign Language' (OCMSL) and 'Original Bangkok Sign Language' (OBSL) on the basis of lexical elicitation from three older signers in Bangkok and Chiangmai whose signing has eluded ASL influence. (More recently, Cooper, 2014, refers to Vietnamese Signed Languages – national but in plural.) Here, as elsewhere, Woodward's approach to delineating and naming sign language varieties appears to be driven by an admirable commitment to recognise and safeguard linguistic diversity in the form of regional diversity and, in the face of ASL resurgence, so-called 'heritage' varieties comprising signs that pre-date the arrival of ASL (Woodward, 2011).

Nevertheless, his approach is usually based on very small samples, questionable comparison and arbitrary classification, and any existing ideological positions held by language users remain undetected. Woodward routinely refers to his 'classic lexicostatistical methods' based on the 100-word Swadesh list, citing Gudschinsky (1956). Palfreyman (2014, 2015) argues that Woodward's use of these methods is highly problematic, chiefly because they have no handle on lexical variation among users, and actually falls short of the requirements of classical lexicostatistics: a scale designed by Swadesh to determine historical relatedness has been misappropriated and is used instead as a nonsensical proxy for mutual intelligibility.

The other failing is an apparent disregard for the views of signers. The Indonesian Association for the Welfare of the Deaf (Gerkatin) refers to BISINDO ('Indonesian Sign Language'), while scholars influenced by Woodward's lexicostatistical method and his ideologies around preserving language diversity (Sze et al., 2015; Wijaya, 2021: 3, 5) refer to Jakarta Sign Language and Yogyakarta Sign Language.[1] Putting to one side for a moment the doubtful assumption that varieties used in each city are sufficiently homogeneous and distinct, the practice of naming sign

[1] Deaf scholars from across the Asia-Pacific region have been taught about Woodward's lexicostatistical methods at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

languages based on cities would result in over five hundred different sign languages in Indonesia alone; there are more effective ways to document variation and to encourage the ongoing use of variants.

At the national level, deaf organisations are often engaged in ongoing struggles to secure the provision of education in sign language, the training and state funding of sign language interpreters, and so on. In many situations, this requires obtaining agreement from governments that favour unitary policies that imply a single national sign language: the need to sponsor a standard, national sign language is certainly part of the reason Gerkatin refers to BISINDO (Palfreyman, 2019). Resourcing is also a consideration: pragmatically, it is easier to persuade most governments to deliver the goods if resources are to be produced in a single sign language. The need for such realpolitik often exerts a strong tendency towards lumping, although in a small number of cases (such as Belgium and Finland) governments have recognised and accommodated multiple sign languages.

Palfreyman moved from using the more neutral term 'Indonesian sign language varieties' (e.g. in Palfreyman, 2015) to using BISINDO out of solidarity with Gerkatin's use of this community-generated term, noting a parallel with the spoken language Malay (Palfreyman, 2019: 271). Just as Malay is referred to by isolect (Ambon Malay, Kupang Malay) so can varieties of BISINDO be specified as necessary (Ambon BISINDO, Kupang BISINDO), thus highlighting the awesome variation found across the Indonesian archipelago.

Our experiences as sociolinguists, albeit working with different sign communities, point to the importance of ongoing engagement with deaf communities, sharing our findings accessibly, and being attentive to the ways that our findings are understood, or misunderstood. We have a responsibility to the data and to language users, and whatever terms we use – or do not use – need to be explained and justified in ways that are useful not just for our academic peers but also for our peers in the community.

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