Is British Sign Language a language? Discuss with reference to sign structure and consider sociolinguistic variables.

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British Sign Language (BSL) is used as the preferred sign language — as opposed to American Sign Language (ASL) — for many of the deaf inhabitants of this country. According to the 2011 British census, 22 000 people reported using a sign language as their main language, of which 15 000 respondents specified that the type was British Sign Language.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of "language" states that a language is a "method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way". With this definition of what languages are and are not, some could argue that written English qualifies as a separate language to spoken English, or that American English is different to British English or Indian English also in that regard. These are more likely, however, to just be considered to be dialects, such as 'Northern' English vs. 'Southern', or 'Queen's' English. Dialects are formally defined as "particular form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region or social group" (Dictionary, 2015).

In relation to sign language, it is interesting to note that nowhere in the definition of "language" is mentioned the use of signs or non-verbal communication apart from writing, such as body-language. This could be seen as deliberately exclusionary — suggesting that sign languages in general are the underclasses, because potentially some may view hearing people as superior. To take a less alarmist view, many dictionary definitions are very old and British Sign Language was only recognised by the UK Government as a strong, bona fide, independent language in March 2003 (Office of Disability Issues, 2014), though it still is classified as having minority status.

Unlike other minority languages such as Gaelic or Welsh, British Sign Language is not taught in schools in this country. Fairly, Gaelic and Welsh are only taught in Ireland (or Scotland), or Wales respectively, where those languages are still actively translated into for the older population, or still have importance for keeping heritage alive and as a marker of an Irish, Scottish or Welsh person's identity (Merriman and Jones, 2009). However, not

learning these two languages does not have an active impact on someone's ability to communicate in the main language of the land in these modern times, as in these cases it is English. This is quite often not the case for deaf or hard of hearing people, unless they have developed their deafness through unfortunate circumstances later in life after having learned to speak, read and write in their 'common' language (Marschark et al., 2010). Some indigenous, minority, languages such as Welsh or Gaelic are taught at GCSE level in certain parts of the country where they are still relevant, and some campaign groups have argued that therefore it is only right that British Sign Language be too, only all over the country because all deaf people do not live together in one part of the UK (Harnisch et al., 2004). They argue that doing so would encourage deaf and hard of hearing students to perservere with education in mixed schools, potentially enable them to not feel so excluded from their peer group at a critical time in their life, while at the same time enabling greater understanding and awareness amongst the hearing population of the difficulties that deaf people face and increase the amount of communication that goes on (Signature, 2014).

With reference to sign language learning, people have recognised that everyone has to start somewhere, hence the introduction of fingerspelling — the ability to spell out words just by signing individual letters without having to know the specific sign for the word you wish to use (Sutton-Spence et al., 1990). This has decreased in popularity over the last ten years (also Sutton-Spence et al. (1990)), but goes to show the variation in the way signers communicate up and down the country, and with varying levels of confidence, such as in standard English in this country there being different accents such as those of the south and those of the north.

British Sign Language has a clearly defined structure in its grammar, yet also the space in front of the body in which the signs are performed, as well as the shape of the hands used when making the sign and subsequently their movement, and whether the hands have, for example, palms facing upwards or downwards (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 408). Sign language users also make heavy use of mouth movements and nodding (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p. 3) which give context to the people communicating. There is more written about mouth movements in American Sign Language than British Sign Language, but it cannot be assumed that all of the same principles apply given that the two languages are not mutually intelligible (Deafness Cognition & Research Centre). We can, however, compare their

two different approaches to signing simple words and the extra gestures (movements of the eyebrows or shoulders) that accompany them both in American and British Sign Language respectively. To give an example particular to the former — American Sign Language — we turn to Mesthrie et al., 2009, page 409. He explains, referencing some other research by Baker-Shenk and Cokely in 1991 that questions with a response of "yes" or "no" are communicated through a "raising of eyebrows", "forward leaning shoulders" and "wide eyes". Questions that mean to gain the questioner information are indicated with "squinted eyebrows" and a "forward movement of the head". Therefore, the importance of these head movements and facial expressions, as well as mouth movements, go someway to showing why signing space is crucial. If someone signs below their waist and is also performing facially, this might be hard for the other person in the conversation to follow, and this might not be in the signing vocabulary of many signers. Related to this, to sign the British supermarket chain *ASDA* in conversation, signers tap their hip or thigh rather than their buttocks, because that is more visible and there is no established sign for behind the body (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p. 5). The adaptation of gestures to different contexts, people, sentences or word formations is done also in standard English and in other types of sign language, for example Auslan, the Australian sign language. For example in standard spoken English it is normal to gesticulate to intensify your point, as well as raise your voice. For signers, voices are obviously not heard as a matter of course, but they still use gestures and hand movements to emphasize or refer to different classes of words, e.g. adverbs (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p. 86).

To give another example this time related to mouth movement as opposed to movement of physical facial features, the mouth moves to perform the action for words such as "vomit" or "laugh", while the hands perform the sign (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p. 84). The above two paragraphs show that all languages have idiosyncracies, and that they are part of what makes a language a language. Sign language's sentence structure is different to that of standard English. Again using an example of American Sign Language, its sentences are constructed using the Subject Verb Object (SVO) scheme. Hence we examine the sentence "the dog chased the cat": where in standard English this sentence is ordered by *'dog'* — *subject, 'chased'* — *verb, 'cat'* — *object* and that sentence is in the past tense, in sign language it is signed as "dog chase cat", with the signer having knowledge of their native language's grammar and knowing that that sentence, even without a past participle 'chase*d*'

is grammatical because of other contextual clues (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999).

All languages evolve and sign languages — whichever variant — is no exception to this. New signs are created all the time, especially in the age of the Internet, and deaf people therefore need to know how to sign "photobomb" or "selfie", to name some examples. These were examined by Bill Vickers, a sign language teacher who himself is deaf and has a vested interest in keeping sign language current, in relation to American Sign Language (Mike Sheffield, 2015). There is a lot of variation amongst old words, let alone new words. In this experiment, two signers of different ages who self-identified as part of the Deaf community (and who are also audiologically deaf) were asked to sign these new words as they would normally do in conversation, but on camera at the same time. They were reasonably similar in concept, but the differences came in the specific actions performed. These differences, however subtle, could, the reader supposes, depend on age, whether they'd come to using the sign before in conversation in a non-simulated situation, or general evolution of language. Indeed, a lot of the comments from the research participants in this study suggested that they hadn't used these signs before, and made them up on the spot based on other words and their own thoughts about what things like "selfies" are. This is a perfect example of language evolution as in standard English — after all, we invented the word "selfie" and made it exist in the Oxford English Dictionary in June 2014.

The statistics which were quoted in the introduction go to show that the Census every five years is evolving and becoming more inclusive, like languages themselves, and having been around for years, sign language is becoming more and more recognised as a language as the years go on.

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