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

Isabell Long

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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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Detail the types and process of language planning. Provide an account of one case study to illustrate how language planning may take place and influence language policy and practice.

Isabell Long (12945093)

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Language planning is a practice considered to be about changing language — for better or for worse — either to add new words for certain types of foods or behaviours for example, or to develop new languages, to name a few of many possible activities. It can also be used strategically by a country's leaders to select its official language or multiple official languages, or indeed campaigns from the general population. The concept of language planning and this term for it was coined by an American linguist Einar Haugen in the late 1950s. Over the years since 1960, linguists have taken a great deal of interest in language planning, with some deeming it detrimental to the natural evolution of language if, for example, new grammars or words are imposed by those part of high up groups or authorities (Fishman, 1974, p. 67). Language groups such as the French *Académie Française* are doing very well, however — they control to some extent what goes into the French dictionaries and draw up grammatical rules.

There are many types of language planning and many processes that can be used to perform it. There exist four types of language planning: corpus planning, status planning, prestige planning and acquisition planning, which are all elaborated on below.

Corpus planning deals with the internal structure of language, and its central purpose is creating and establishing linguistic norms such as grammar and spoken words (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 372). This becomes especially useful when there could be different languages taught for religious or educational purposes such as in schools or in places of worship, for example classical Hebrew for religious scriptures and modern Hebrew used for education and in day-to-day life. This is partly because classical Hebrew in this case is missing science and technology-related vocabulary which are becoming more and more important in this day and age.

Language planning of the status variety is about people making efforts to change a language's use within the realm of people who speak or write the language. This could be done by varying the language people learn in — from Dutch to English for example, if English is deemed the language of the world and if it is deemed important that everyone be immersed

in it. It has been shown that immersion has a key part to play in language learning, so instructing pupils in the target language is, some say, a good idea (Johnson and Swain, 1997).

Prestige planning, the penultimate type of language planning, is often used by governments to "influence how language is perceived" and to choose or determine by research what level of respect is given to the particular language (Grzech, 2013, p. 296). Prestige planning can be used with — or against — both speakers of the language or non-speakers of the language.

Acquisition planning is perhaps more self-explanatory. This final type is to do with how inhabitants of the country end up learning the language. Usually brought about via schools, with lessons being taught in the new language — partially as with status planning —, "language-in-education planning", as it is widely known thanks to Kaplan and Baldauf in 1997, concerns itself with books being published, recommending or blankly changing teaching methods, or deciding how much money should be spent on introducing this new language (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997). That said, it is interesting to note that the framework for this type of planning is the only one to heavily and directly mention money. It could be argued whether money should come into influence or question when we are evaluating or changing something so fundamental to society as language use and adoption. Here, it is worth noting that poor countries still manage to harness the education system generally, with outside support, and don't need much money with which to do it, therefore it might be a moot point that language planning and therefore teaching in a language requires sizeable financial investment (Lockheed et al., 1991).

The processes of language planning lead on from the aforementioned types they are related to. A framework was developed in order to describe these processes of language planning, and it contains four stages: selection, codification, implementation and elaboration (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 375).

In the first stage — selecting language — one specifically chooses a language or a dialect to enable the performing of certain functions in society or group of people. Unfortunately, again according to Mesthrie et al. (2009, p. 375), it is "usually the most prestigious dialect or language [that] is chosen [...] for example Parisien French". This is unfortunate because

it may make some minority dialects, for example "la langue d'Oc" or "Oil" feel less valued or not at all recognised, and impact their ability to be able to be taught in schools in those areas of a country (again in this case, France).

The second stage as mentioned above — codification — also has sub-stages related to the development of written communication, grammatical rules and vocabulary specification which all help to fulfil its purpose of "creating a linguistic norm"(Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 375). These are named graphisation, grammatication and lexicalisation respectively — "lexicon" of course meaning "[t]he vocabulary of a person, language, or branch of knowledge" (Dictionary, 2015a). The next stage — implementation — could be argued to be fairly self-explanatory: it involves implementing the new language in ways such as producing literature and introducing it into the education system as a formal, taught language or a language in which lessons are taught (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 378).

The fourth and final stage is sometimes referred to not as elaboration but as modernisation (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 379) and involves — as the second name suggests — modernising languages to "meet the needs of modern life and technology" (again Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 379), such as new words like "selfie" or "computer" in the technological age. This or any creation of new words is known as "neologism" (Dictionary, 2015b), and is extremely important for the continued development of even a mature language like English, and therefore especially so for a young or minority language like — to take an example of a case study from Mesthrie et al. (2009) — Kohi, a South African language.

A case study is useful to analyse when making decisions about whether or not to use language planning. One such case study was famously conducted by Ivar Ansen and Knud Knudsen (reproduced in Mesthrie et al., 2009 from Haugen, 1987). It was centered around Norway and the adoption of a new language — Norweigan — and the cancelling of Danish as the de facto "language of administration, politics and education" when Norway gained its independence. Their research allowed them to separate so-called country language and state language into two, each creating one of "Landsmäl" and "Riksmäl" respectively. Eventually in the 1880s the Norweigan government recognised them both and they were the official languages of Norway, with their only real differences being with regard to their grammars and sentence structures. This got "awkward and impractical" and language committees formed

from the government sought to unify the two strands of language. This caused an even greater divide, however, between the lower classes and the upper classes who thought that their cherished languages curated over the years would get lost or infected with colloquialisms. These divides are a perfect example of why language planning can end up not being such a good idea, such a perfect solution for all, and this is where language planning — also known as language policy where governments are involved in setting rules, frameworks or policies to do with the adoption of language — becomes contentious.

To combat this discontent and perceived inequality, it has been brought into force by organisations like UNESCO as early as 1990 that people have rights to language, so much so that a Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights was signed in a similar fashion to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p. 390). The United States was the first to codify a person's linguistic rights in 1991. These include being able to communicate "freely" in any language they desire "in public or in private" and, especially applicable to minority languages (such as Navajo, of Native America), "to be able to maintain their native language and teach it to their offspring". This is very important so that heritage is not lost and historical records are preserved. If children learn minority languages as a matter of course, even not formally but passed down by their parents or grandparents, when their elders die they could possibly translate things in history, becoming an invaluable economic resource and allowing us to discover details about our planet — or indeed others — that might have remained buried by the sometimes overzealous actions of language planners always wishing to modernize by destroying or devaluing systematically a country or region's heritage.

The examination of the case study above illustrates why the process of language planning is referred to by Fishman (1974) as something that "should not be done", as explored in the introduction. However, it has many advantages, most of which have been touched on. Importantly, it is good for modernisation of countries' languages, which is very much needed in this day and age if citizens of any countries are going to be able to understand the world, and yet also if existing in some cases minority languages are to be preserved in often rural or societally excluded communities.

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