

**Zeshan, Ulrike. 2000. Sign Language in Indo-Pakistan: A description of a signed language. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Pg. xii + 178. Hb. Crown. Alkaline paper. Price: not mentioned.**

**Reviewed by Samar Sinha.**

Sign Language in Indo-Pakistan: A description of a signed language (SLIP) is a revised master's thesis (University of Cologne) in light of the author's latest research results. The title of the book draws one's attention towards 'sign' and 'signed', which, in principle, have no distinction in the sign linguistics literature. SLIP, dedicated to the Deaf communities in India and Pakistan, deserves its long due publication on sign language of the sub-continent and similarly deserves review more than in the standard conventional length of a review article.

Of the five chapters, in the first chapter, Introduction, Zeshan points out that the linguistic study of sign language (SL) in India and Pakistan is virtually unstudied. Apart from a handful of linguistic works so far in these countries, the study of sign language is confined mainly within institutions imparting special education.

Based on her fieldwork in Karachi and New Delhi, she asserts that despite regional variations in signs, there is one underlying grammar of Pakistan Sign Language (PSL) (as used by ABSA Research Group 1987, NISE 1991, 1994, Sir Syed Deaf Association 1989, Zeshan 1996) and Indian Sign Language (ISL). Hence, she calls the sign languages of these colonial cousins as Indo-Pakistan Sign Language (IPSL), rather than Indo-Pakistani Sign Language. Her claim that there is a unitary sign language in India is based on Vasishta, Woodward & Wilson (VWW) (1978) and in passing but not explicitly illustrated to support it. The different studies on lexicon points towards greater similarity (Woodward 1993, ISL Dictionary 2001). At the present state of knowledge about sign language in India, any claim about one sign language in India is merely speculative rather than empirically supported when we account Deaf communities of the Silent Village, Karnataka, and a village in Mizoram. On the other hand, Jepson's (1991) claim about Rural ISL is based on a rural deaf individual rather than the rural Deaf community. The regional lexical variations of particular signs in Pakistan are photographically shown.

With reference to post 1960 developments in Pakistan, Signed Urdu (SU), which she claims as 'Urdu based variety of IPSL', is not a variety of IPSL but an invented manually coded Urdu structure using IPSL signs, modified signs, and neologism. Had the author used the contrast between SU and IPSL, it would have been much easier to understand the difference between the two. A reminder, India is not far behind in a similar 'the mask of benevolence' effort, funded by UNICEF in developing Indian Signing System (ISS). Zeshan mentions the reality about deaf education in India citing Deshmukh (1996). Apart from the weekly sign news telecast on the national channel, the GOI has not formulated any substantial policy and programmes for the empowerment of the Indian Deaf community. The linguistic status of sign language in these two countries is a constitutional question rather than 'not an officially recognized language' (p.8) as mentioned in the book. In the later part of the chapter, she briefly discusses her research methodology, and pros and cons of her work.

In the second chapter, *The Signs*, the author discusses about IPSL handshapes (HSs) and proposes its preliminary inventory based on the frequency of occurrence in her corpus rather than on phonetic principle. Her classifications of HS, which are photographically shown, are basic, central, marginal, problematic, and meaningful. The problematic HS, which are 'rare and unclear that their existence in IPSL is questionable' (p.24), do exist but not found in her corpus since her data on wh-question is scarce (p.10). The author claims that classifier HSs are not found in IPSL based on VWW (1978), and analytical problem, and consequently disapproves Boyes-Braem's (1990) typological claim that the classifiers are found in all sign languages investigated so far. Contrary to her claim, classifier HSs are found, and are incorporated into a class of verbs signs. On the other formational parameters, viz. location (signing space), movement, and orientation, and phonological operations, there is not a single line discussion. This chapter, however, does not provide basic essential descriptions of sub-lexical structure and organisation, and is thus far from being true to the title of the book.

Sign Families, which basically include opposites, homonyms, polysemes, synonyms, and compounds, are well described with examples and illustrations. Apart from these, the signs that share one of the formational parameters constantly that are also a constant semantic element (Generalised Meaningful Parameter Values, Woll 1983: 40). IPSL time-line in contrast with the American Sign Language (ASL) time-line is well discussed with illustrations enriching the content on the topic.

Zeshan also discusses the signs that show evident connection with Hindi-Urdu mouth patterns. The mouth pattern, e.g. 8 (p.43), is used to disambiguate signs, hence, phonemic. To the contrary, in pg.49, the Karachi and the Indian signers produce the mouth patterns of 'allah' and 'bhagwan' or 'god' with the sign GOD, respectively. There are two or more mouth patterns for a sign not as a synonym but points towards the signer's socio-linguistic, religious background. This suggests, simply, mouth pattern is not an integral part of IPSL, unlike other non-manual components of sign. Unlike mouth gestures, English fingerspelling, and initialisation and/or abbreviation are undoubtedly an effect and influence of institution. Along with the variation in the exact shape of English fingerspelling, we find typologically two sets of English fingerspelling – ambicheric and mixed (see Stokoe 1974: 346) among the users of IPSL. With the passage of time, it is observed that fingerspelled signs are further abbreviated and/or initialised, which again are nativised as sign, whose etymological source is difficult to ascertain e.g. E-MAIL.

It is interesting to note that IPSL has identical signs for BIRD, DUCK as in ASL; HOUSE as in BSL, and HELP as in the both. The author is struck off by this commonality, and fancies about its genetic relationship and/or lexical borrowing rather than by iconicity. Further, she appals/stupefies her reader by treating HOUSE as a loan sign and remarks "...in India and Pakistan because all roofs are flat..." (p. 41). Moreover, it needs to be understood that not only "Indian Hindus," but also all of the sub-continent calls God as 'upar wala' (the Above One). The British colonisation is not sufficient to say that BSL has an areal influence over IPSL. On the other hand, the English fingerspelling as a result of institutional effort is an issue for exploration. On the non-manual components of signs, Zeshan discusses its grammatical relevance, and raises issue for further investigation. She briefly discusses iconic signs using Mandell's (1977) classification, and claims that half of the IPSL lexicon is iconic. She

concludes with an established note that iconicity exists along a continuum.

In the third chapter, Morphology, she discusses the difficulties in word-class analysis and formal characteristics, which leads her to question the applicability of syntactic universals in IPSL. Although she claims that IPSL does not make distinctions in word class, in fact, her data falsifies this analysis. The N-V distinction is in fact marked by movement (and intensity [NISE 1991])- the lexeme FLY with movement is a verb TO FLY (e.g. 39, p.56), but as a stationary sign is an AEROPLANE/AIRLINE (e.g. 56, p.101).

The use of interpersonal space is grammatically relevant in sign language and is one of the sign formation parameters. Zeshan classifies IPSL signs into three types: positioning, directional, and movement. The former two are described explicitly with examples unlike the third one. Fig. 62, p.60 shows verb TO FLY in its citation form, it is not noun AIRPLANE as in the text. In IPSL, XATAM (B) is a verb for “finish/end”, and XATAM (A) and HO\_GAYA are used to mark perfect (Zeshan’s completive) aspect. XATAM (A) is grammaticised sign from XATAM (B). HO\_GAYA is a weak drop form of XATAM (B) showing the phonetic loss of the non-dominant hand and has further grammaticised as an enclitic to the preceding sign (see Sinha in prep).

Other aspectual markers are also discussed in detail. The IPSL lexicon does not specify number for nouns, and plurality is marked by repetition of the sign in space, or quantifiers, and/or numerals. Zeshan concludes that the repetition is for plurality with noun signs and for distributive aspect with verbs. However, her conclusion mismatches with the morphemic translation she provides. E.g. 20, p.66 would mean ‘I have tried several times with my certificate in private firms’ rather than ‘...at several private (firms)’, and the morphemic glossing in the e.g. 22, p. 66 is not distributive but plural.

However, Zeshan’s discussion of the morphological processes in IPSL is incomplete. Although she does describe number signs and the incorporation of the first four digits, she does not discuss direct object incorporation further (as evidenced by the incorporated classifier HS of direct objects with verbs like LENA (to take) and DENA (to give)). She also discusses two sign formation processes - fusion and compounding, but does not mention other processes like reduplication, fingerspelling, hedging, and aerial writing.

The fourth chapter is a syntactic description. The sentence and clause boundaries are based on her bilingual (bimodal) informant’s translation indicated by the Urdu propositions. Mentioning the lack of methodology essential for syntactic study, she ‘mostly prefer to speak of regularities rather than rules’ (p.88) using semantic roles. However, I will use formal syntactic terms in the review. The WO tendency is inclined towards the SOV. In fact, IPSL is SVO with asymmetry between matrix and embedded clauses (Sinha 2003). She, further, points that the most semantically prominent sign is clause initial, and labels the structure as topic-comment with the semantically prominent sign appearing overtly again in the comment as peculiarity though information on non-manual parameters even crude is not glossed. Moreover, it points towards discourse structure rather than information packaging strategy and structure within clausal syntax.

On tense, the author writes that there is no temporal inflection but indicated by clause initial NP adverbs of time. Contrary to her expectation as inflection, in IPSL HS, which marks the time unit incorporates with the tense and results into NP adverbs of time. The similar tense marking system is found in Nootka (Comrie 1985: 13). The discourse initial tense in the informational neutral structure is followed unless new tense is established along the time line for non-present and present. IPSL has present-non-present distinction in which the former is unmarked, and its overt marking is for emphatic or for contrast.

Zeshan briefly discusses imperatives, negatives, emphatics, and existential particles, and invites further research. She illustrates some compounds as modifying constructions discussing the headedness of the construction in the chapter on syntax rather than in the previous chapter. She, further, raises an issue of hyponymy of the two adjacent signs, on which she renders- ‘to classify rather than (than) modify the other sign’ (p.99; italics mine for typological error). Her speculation directs toward mini-topicalisation type constructions but does not provide sentential constructions in which they are found to think further.

The author discusses loci, grammatically relevant points in the signing space, and summarises the localisation strategies employed in IPSL and ASL discourse. She discusses various possibilities of referring to loci- directionality, positioning, indexing, eye gaze, and role-play, and inconsistencies involved in it with reference to loci in the signing space, which is under described in the book. The non-manual articulatory channels, their forms and functions in polarity, interrogatives, and in the conditional clause are investigated concluding with a list of her queries and a familiar note ‘further research is needed’ (p. 116). Towards the end of the chapter, Zeshan’s unfeigned remark makes her reader simpering.

In the final chapter, Discourse strategies, she discusses discourse strategies- contrastive use of signing space for places, situations, and tenses, handedness, and perspectives using space drawing analogy with stage.

SLIP is enriched with bibliography, index, appendices, sample text, Devnagari and Perso-Arabic transcription, abbreviations, manual alphabets, 300 word dictionary, graphics, photographs, content, tables, and with cross-linguistic references from numerous sign languages. She uses Hindi-Urdu words in Latin letters for sign text. The printer’s devil and the copy errors abound the book from cover to cover. Importantly, in the spine and the end cover, the title is Indo-pakistan rather than as in the front cover. In the graphic on the front cover for SIGN, the direction of movement is the other way; Baluchistan not Beluchistan (p. 3, 4), speech data rather than sign data (p. 8), sign/signer not speak/speaker (p. 10), MAUT not FAUT (p. 63), numbering error (p. 90)- to mention a few. Despite these matters not so diverting, devoid of technical terminology and framework makes SLIP accessible for general readers, too (may be not in terms of price and availability). Sign language, undoubtedly, is not only a landmark in the linguistic study of sign language of the sub-continent, but also an invitation. To make the matter shorter and direct, this book is a long due publication, and is a must in every library shelf. Equally, Zeshan’s description, conclusion, and the above-mentioned familiar note, are stimulating enough for young researchers to pursue sign linguistics.

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