6 British Sign Language

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6.1 Introduction

The study of British Sign Language (BSL) can inform the field of applied linguistics by providing an insight into a native British minority language with a language community unlike any other. Close and culturally informed study of this often misunderstood language can provide insight into issues of language planning, with its related topics of acquisition, second language learning and testing, language teacher education, language attrition and maintenance, and lexicography. When studying the implications of minority status on any language it is useful to consider the reality facing users of a language whom the majority society frequently sees as disabled English users. The threats facing BSL have important implications for social, regional, and situational variation in a language where native speakers are greatly outnumbered by non-native speakers.

BSL is the language of Britain's deaf community. Within this simple statement are four essential ideas: it is a language, it is British, it is a visual language created by a community of people who cannot hear spoken language under normal conditions, and it is used by an identifiable social language community.

6.1.1 BSL is an independent language, distinct from English

Throughout history the status of BSL and other sign languages has been denied:

> Gesture languages have been observed among the lower-class Neapolitans, among Trappist monks . . . among the Indians of our western plains . . . and among groups of deaf-mutes . . . It seems certain that these gesture languages are merely developments of ordinary gestures and that any and all complicated or

> not immediately intelligible gestures are based on the conventions of ordinary speech. (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 39)

Despite extensive linguistic descriptions (e.g., Deuchar, 1984; Brennan, 1992; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999) that clearly demonstrate that BSL easily fulfils all linguistic and social requirements of a human language, its status is still misunderstood by many people. In a debate in the House of Lords in 1999 concerning the safeguards for sign language users being interviewed at police stations Lord Williams of Mostyn made the common error of equating BSL with a form of English made visible. "It is correct that the sign language to which the noble Lord [Lord Annaly] referred is a distinct language, but it is based on the English language" (Hansard, February 18, 1999).

6.1.2 BSL is the national sign language of Britain

Its independence from English is demonstrated by the mutual unintelligibility of BSL, American Sign Language, and Irish Sign Language, despite use of English in all three countries. Although many signs in all known sign languages are visually motivated, the sources of visual motivation are rarely transparent (Klima & Bellugi, 1979), are often culturally determined (Pizzuto & Volterra, 2000), and are often metaphorical (Boyes Braem, 1985; Woll, 1983). Cultural differences can be seen: the BSL sign DOOR might be expected to be international, as the hands appear to represent a door opening at its hinges. However, traditional Japanese doors do not have hinges, but slide, and Japanese Sign Language reflects this. Even when cultural elements are not relevant, languages can simply focus on different aspects of a referent. The American sign HORSE represents the ears of a horse, while the BSL sign represents riding. The BSL sign PENCIL is motivated by the action of writing with a pencil, but the Uganda Sign Language sign represents sharpening a pencil.

Not only is the language unintelligible to users of other national sign languages, it is also recognized as a single national language in its own right. The existence of a sign language presupposes a language community and a claim to the existence of a national sign language implies a national sign language community.

Although deaf people have clearly communicated through signs for centuries (Miles, 1988), the modern sign language used in Britain is linked to the development of large towns and cities and the establishment of schools for deaf children in the eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries. Large numbers of deaf children brought together in deaf schools, where signed language was frequently a mode of instruction, promoted the development of sign language in Britain.

There was not, however, a single source of the language which spread across the country and no written means by which to standardize it, as happened to English. Consequently, regional dialects of BSL were highly distinct. There

was no national policy for deaf schools, and no single "parent" school at which teachers were trained before going to teach in other parts of the country. However, there was considerable movement of teachers between schools around the country and this could have helped to unify the language to some extent. For example, Matthew Burns, the first deaf head master of the Bristol deaf school spent time in London, Edinburgh and Aberdeen before his time in Bristol. He later moved to London.

Despite forces that helped to level the regional dialects, the language was recognized in the 1970s as being highly diverse. Nearly a century of oppression by an oral education system had hindered any coherent standardization of the language. When, at this time, linguists named the signing of British deaf people as "British Sign Language," it was more of a social judgment than one based on lexical similarities across the country. Deaf people referred to their language as "deaf signing" and did not recognize the name "British Sign Language."

Over the last 30 years, the language has become much more recognizable as a single national language. Since 1980, television programmes have been broadcast nationally in BSL. The establishment of the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) to oversee the teaching of BSL and the production of a BSL/English dictionary have also helped to standardize the vocabulary.

Although there is still considerable regional variation in BSL, most members of the British deaf community today would recognize their language as being different from those of other countries.

6.1.3 BSL is a visual language, created by deaf people

As a visual language it makes use of the physical options available for the articulation of linguistically meaningful elements – the two hands, the head, face (including the mouth), and the body. Much of its vocabulary is visually motivated (see above) and much of the language's grammar exploits the possibility of placing and moving signs within a space in front of the signer's body (see, for example, Liddell, 1990). The availability of multiple articulators also allows signers to produce more than one piece of linguistic information at a time. A sign may be produced with one hand, then held, while the other hand produces a second sign that relates to the first. For example, in the BSL sentence "The cat sat under the chair," one hand produces the sign for "chair" while the other produces the sign referring to the "cat" below the first hand to indicate the relationship "under."

Early modern research on sign languages emphasized the underlying structural similarities of spoken and sign languages, but more recent research has moved toward recognition that there are systematic typological differences. These arise mainly from the interaction of language form with modality. Phonological and morphological structures differ, since sign languages exhibit a relatively high degree of systematic correspondence between form and meaning

(iconicity or visual motivation) in comparison to spoken languages. There are also consistent grammatical features in which sign languages differ from spoken languages. Sign languages distinguish 1st and non-1st person, while spoken languages usually contrast 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person; sign languages prioritize object agreement while spoken languages prioritize subject agreement. Sign languages exploit the use of space for grammatical purposes, preferring three-dimensionality in syntax, while spoken languages prefer linearization and affixation. Other differences arise from the properties of the articulators (there are two active articulators in sign languages – the hands) and the differing properties of the visual and auditory perceptual systems.

Observation of such differences has led most recently to active consideration of the extent to which the contrasting typological properties of spoken and signed languages indicate that linguistic theory may need to take greater account of modality (Meier, Cormier, & Quinto-Pozos, 2002).

It has also been noted that there is greater typological variation among spoken languages than among sign languages. There are a number of possible explanations for the grammatical similarities among sign languages which still remain to be researched fully. Sign languages are relatively young languages, and indeed, the recent studies of Nicaraguan Sign Language (Kegl, Senghas, & Coppola, 1999) suggest that sign languages can arise and develop spontaneously in deaf communities over three generations. Iconicity as an organizing factor in the lexicon may also result in greater similarity at the lexical level (Woll, 1984). Additionally, the linear syntax found in spoken languages may intrinsically allow greater differences than spatial syntax. Lastly, the relatively low percentage of signers who are themselves the children of signers results in continual recreolization with resulting similarity of grammar (Fischer, 1978). There is evidence to support all of these hypotheses, but a great deal of research remains to be done in this area.

6.1.4 BSL is used by a language community

Membership of the British deaf community is not necessarily defined by a person's hearing ability but rather by identifying with the deaf way of life. This can involve participation in a variety of deaf social networks, use of BSL, or choice of a partner from within the deaf community. For members of the deaf community, being deaf is not a medical condition but an attitudinal state (Woll & Lawson, 1980). An upper-case "D'" is usually used to distinguish "Deaf" as a cultural, linguistic, and social identity from "deaf" as an audiological status. (For simplicity we have used a lower case "d" throughout this chapter.) Ladd (2002) has suggested the use of the term "Deafhood" to reflect the difference between these.

Although most members of the deaf community are deaf, their degree of hearing loss is irrelevant in the same way that darkness of skin color is irrelevant to black community membership. The vast majority of the eight million people in Britain estimated to have a hearing loss, most of whom have

lost hearing as part of aging, are not part of the deaf community. These people might rather be considered as "hearing people whose ears don't work" who rely entirely on English for communication. There are some hearing people, such as the hearing children of deaf parents or the hearing partners of deaf people, who may be members of the deaf community. However, they often have marginal status, feeling peripheral to the deaf community or that they straddle deaf and hearing communities (Corker, 1996).

The deaf community is constantly changing. The central position of the deaf club in community life is diminishing as changes in technology (such as SMS (Short Message Service) and captioning on television) mean that deaf people no longer need to meet centrally for information exchange or entertainment (Burns, 1998). Until the 1980s, most deaf children were educated in special schools. Today, most deaf children are educated in mainstream schools. This has had considerable impact on the self-identity of younger deaf people, their attitude to older members of the community, and their use of BSL. However, the deaf community, while different from that of even 20 years ago, is still a central part of the lives of many deaf people, and use of BSL is a defining feature of their identity (Dye & Kyle, 2000).

Deaf children do not automatically acquire BSL. They need to be exposed to linguistic role models, just like any other children. Deaf children exposed to good BSL-using linguistic role models learn BSL in stages similar to those of hearing children acquiring English. For many deaf children, however, access to mature linguistic role models is not straightforward. Approximately 5 percent of British deaf children have deaf parents, and so receive early exposure to BSL (see Dye & Kyle, 2000). The overwhelming majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents with no knowledge of BSL. Increasingly, hearing parents are learning BSL in order to provide an accessible home language. However, for many children, the only BSL users in their environment are hearing teachers and classroom language assistants. Access to deaf BSL-using classroom assistants or to deaf BSL-using teachers is a major linguistic benefit.

6.2 Child-Directed Language

Hearing professionals working with deaf children are increasingly aware of their poor BSL skills. This is a positive development, as in the past deaf children were often blamed for not understanding the teacher's language. Research and training in the area of child-directed BSL, especially to school-age children is still very limited. However, some research has been done on child-directed BSL used with very young children. Gallaway and Woll (1994) have reviewed features of child-directed BSL. Features include: signing on the baby's body; holding and manipulating the baby's hands to articulate a sign; placing the child on the mother's lap, facing away from the mother and signing in front of the child; signing the name of an object on the object; signing the name of an object while holding it; enlarging the movement or increasing

the duration of a sign's movement; repeating a sign's movement; using special baby signs.

6.3 Social Dialects in BSL

BSL, like any other living language, has many variants. Variation may be attributable to the social experience and identity of signers or to the setting in which interaction occurs.

6.3.1 Social class

Social class does not have the same linguistic defining features for the British deaf community as for British hearing people. Deaf people are more likely to have unskilled and semi-skilled jobs than hearing people, so income is not necessarily a good guide to social class dialect variation. In the American deaf community, there is a recognized elite social class of deaf people who have been to Gallaudet University, the only university for deaf people in the world. The most noticeable social class distinction in BSL is based on family background: whether the signer is from a hearing or deaf family. Those born to deaf parents are more likely to have had early exposure to a good model of adult BSL. Those born to hearing parents may only learn BSL when they start school, or sometimes as late as when they leave school. Consequently, those deaf people coming from deaf families are seen as members of a linguistic elite. There are substantial grammatical differences between the signing of adults from deaf and from hearing families.

Social class in hearing society may also have some effect upon BSL. In the past, children from poorer families were more likely to suffer childhood diseases that cause deafness. Working-class children were also more likely to be sent to deaf schools (often termed "asylums") where education was poor and expectations were low, but where BSL flourished. Children with wealthier parents were more likely to go to private or smaller schools where there was a greater emphasis placed on English skills.

6.3.2 Men and women's dialect

In some sign languages (e.g., Irish Sign Language, see Le Master & Dwyer, 1991; Matthews, 1996; and Burns, 1998) the differences between men's and women's signing are substantial. This is not the case in BSL, where gender differences are minimal, and rarely extend beyond stylistic variation. However, as with English speakers, conversational style and lexicon differ between men and women. For example (Coates & Sutton-Spence, 2001), analysis of conversation of deaf same-sex friendship groups found that young men talk about sport (especially football) while young women discuss their family lives and the lives, loves, and behavior of celebrities. Although this may appear

self-evident, it is an important issue for language pedagogy, as tutors may not include in their lessons the appropriate lexicon for topics more regularly discussed by members of the opposite sex. Anecdotal observations that men use more "coarse" signing than women received some support in this same conversation sample, with deaf men using more expletives and socially unacceptable sign variants for potentially taboo topics.

Turn-taking also differs among men and women signers. For example, in women's talk, "interruptions" are not really a challenge to take the floor but a supportive reinforcement of what another person has said as part of a collaborative floor. This is less common with men's talk, where mutual support is provided in different ways. Women also provide much more feedback as "backchannel" responses than men do.

6.3.3 Signs linked to sexual orientation

Varieties specific to gay communities are seen within many languages, with distinct lexical items and often their own pronunciation. In Britain, a gay slang, Polari, was used extensively by gay men, especially in London, before the legalization of homosexuality in the late 1960s. Polari was important for creating social identity and ensuring that non-speakers remained outsiders.

Although research has not revealed a BSL equivalent of Polari, F. Elton (personal communication) has researched a variety of BSL which she has called GSV (Gay Sign Variant). GSV contains many signs that are specific to the gay deaf community. Although gay members of the deaf community will occasionally use GSV in the presence of heterosexuals, it is pre-eminently the style or dialect of deaf gay men and its use by heterosexual deaf signers or by those outside the deaf community is frowned upon. A defining feature is a recognizable "camp" pronunciation of BSL. At the sub-lexical level, some signs are characterized by the extension of the little finger. In ASL, "pinky extension" has been identified as a pronunciation variable used especially by women, but its use by men is not specifically equated with homosexuality, and in BSL, extension of the little finger is a stylistic sub-lexical variation not necessarily associated with GSV.

One feature of Polari (and other slangs – e.g., the French Verlan (from *l'envers* – 'backwards') is the use of "backslang" (e.g., *riah*, for *hair*, and *eek*, from *ecaf* for *face*). Some lexical differences in GSV can also be regarded as exemplifying phonological "opposites" to BSL signs, for example, reversing the direction of the palm in BORING, or using the little finger instead of the index finger for signs such as HEARING.

6.3.4 Signs linked to ethnic group

There are dialects of ASL that are identifiable as "Black ASL" and "White ASL." Segregation in American society, including deaf clubs, and separate

education for black and white children has resulted in language varying between racial groups. Black signers often know both the white and black varieties of sign, while white signers often only know the white signs (Aramburo, 1989). The variation in the BSL of black and white signers is less marked for a number of reasons. The black deaf community has only recently developed: Deaf people did not immigrate during the first wave of immigration from the West Indies, and black deaf children are in the minority in British deaf schools. Variation in the British black deaf community is mostly limited to isolated lexical items and use of facial expressions and gestures also found in the black hearing community (James, 2001; James & Woll, in press).

The British Asian community is also relatively small and only recently established, but there are now increasing numbers of Asian deaf children in British schools. An "Asian" variety of BSL may emerge if Asian deaf people begin to see themselves as a single, unified social group. This is unlikely, as Asian people in Britain come from many different countries, have many different home languages, and belong to several different religious and cultural groups.

The issue of ethnic minority BSL dialects has enormous practical implications for sign language interpreters and other service providers. Interpreters from traditional white British backgrounds may be unable to cope with words and concepts that are common in Afro-Caribbean English but not in their own dialects. Not only will they not have the signs, but they also will not know either the English words or concepts.

6.3.5 Religious groups

There are a few differences in BSL arising from religious identity. There are some differences between Catholic and Protestant signing. The signing of deaf British Catholics has been influenced by Irish Sign Language because of the strong Irish presence in Catholic deaf schools, and Irish-trained priests serve the Catholic deaf communities in Britain. Catholics use many initialized signs with handshapes taken from the Irish manual alphabet (Woll, Sutton-Spence, & Elton, 2001). In Glasgow, the Catholic and Protestant deaf communities have different dialects, reinforced by membership of different deaf clubs and sports teams, as well as churches.

The dialect of Britain's Jewish signers, whether they are seen as an ethnic group or one identified primarily by religious beliefs, may also be traced to their education and community identity. The Residential School for Jewish Deaf Children existed from 1864 to 1965. Although the school used oral communication methods, the children signed among themselves in private and out of the classroom, just as children did in other British deaf schools using oral methods (Weinberg, 1992). Attendance at this school gave children a strong Jewish identity, despite their deafness. In effect, they had a Jewish deaf identity. Today, younger Jewish deaf people sign very differently from older members

of the community. Apart from those signs specific to Jewish religion and customs, their signing is the same as the BSL used by other people of their age.

6.3.6 Age dialect

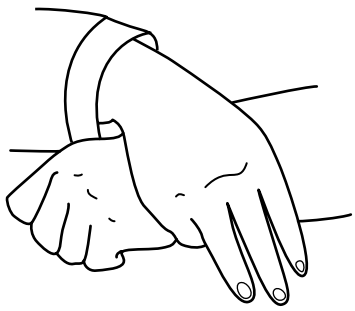
The changing experiences and social identities of deaf people have resulted in age-related variation in BSL. As with other language communities, younger people are language innovators; and this role of linguistic innovation is particularly seen in young deaf men (Wardhaugh, 1992; Battison, 1978). As a very broad generalization, older deaf people (for example, those over 70) use more fingerspelling and many fewer English mouthings than younger deaf people (Sutton-Spence, Woll, & Allsop, 1991). Deaf people aged under 20 use a form of BSL that is more heavily influenced by English grammar, with relatively little fingerspelling. There is also lexical variation among signers from different age groups. Some younger deaf people, in a deliberate move to dissociate themselves from English influences, avoid use of English mouthings or fingerspelling.

The age-related differences are due to three major factors. Firstly, as we have seen, there are few signing deaf parents of deaf children. This means that parents cannot transmit their language to their children. This lack of continuity in language transmission between generations results in extensive inter-generational language change.

Secondly, changes in educational policy have had a very large impact on the signing of deaf people. Before the 1940s, English was taught through lip-reading and fingerspelling, resulting in fingerspelling being a dominant feature of the signing of the older age group. Since the 1940s, improvements in hearing aid technology have meant that deaf children have been expected to use their residual hearing to listen to and learn English, although signing was always tolerated outside the classroom in residential schools. Since the 1970s there have been increasingly tolerant attitudes toward the use of signing in deaf school classrooms. At the same time, however, residential schools have been closing, with most deaf children sent to local mainstream schools. This has reduced the size of the community of child signers. It remains to be seen what effect this will have upon young people's BSL.

A third reason for age differences in BSL is technological innovation. Many signs in BSL reflect some aspect of the appearance of referents or their use. As technology has changed, so have signs, to reflect the new appearance of old technology, or how new devices are handled or operated. The BSL sign for "telephone" has changed over time as the appearance and use of telephones has changed. Similar changes may be seen in signs for "train," "camera," and "watch."

Old signs also die out. For example, signs such as PAWN-BROKER and ALMS are no longer in widespread use, although they are illustrated in a very basic list of signs from 100 years ago (see Figure 6.1).



PAWN

Figure 6.1 Sign for PAWN-BROKER

6.4 Regional Dialects in BSL

In a study of regional variation in BSL, signers in Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester, London, and Bristol were presented with a list of English words to translate (Woll, 1991). Subjects included a wide age range of men and women. Specific groups of words were chosen: some were culturally central to BSL users (e.g., DEAF, HEARING, INTERPRETER); some were everyday words (e.g., BRITISH, BUSINESS, THEATRE); and some had recently entered BSL (e.g., DISCRIMINATION, COMMUNITY). Extensive regional sign differences were recorded, with many signs specific to only one region, including signs for color terms, days of the week and numerals. In most cases, however, one form was used or recognized by signers in all regions. Thus, it appeared that signers were bi-dialectal. National broadcasting of BSL on television only began in 1981 but since that time, signers have had the opportunity to see more varieties of BSL, leading to a greater familiarity with different dialect forms.

Although the recording of different regional signs is interesting for an appreciation of the variation within BSL, these findings are also significant for interpreters and for those working in broadcast media. With only a few BSL/English interpreter training programs in Britain, newly qualified interpreters may very well find themselves working with dialects with which they are not familiar, and facing clients who do not understand their signs.

Regional dialect differences in BSL are most likely related to regional residential deaf schools. We may expect a trend toward dialect leveling now that so many children are mainstreamed or attend Partially Hearing Units near to their homes. Coupled with a decline in attendance at deaf clubs, deaf people's access to regional dialects may be lessened and the "national" signs used by deaf television presenters and hearing interpreters may become more dominant.

The publication of BSL dictionaries may also become a unifying force in BSL. If a regional sign is excluded from a dictionary (or if it is labeled as a "regional sign") its use may decline.

6.5 Situational Dialects: BSL Register

As with all languages, BSL changes according to the situation in which it is being used. The details of BSL situational variants have yet to be researched in depth, but it is clear that there are sub-lexical, lexical, and grammatical differences in BSL, depending on the identity of the addressee, the topic of the utterance, the function of the discourse, and the formality of the situation. In casual BSL, we see the following features when compared to more formal BSL (Deuchar, 1984; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999; similar features are described for ASL by Zimmer, 1989):

- Less finger spelling
- More use of non-manual features, especially for grammatical function
- Less evidence of English influence
- Greater use of metaphor and idioms
- Reduction of two-handed signs to one-handed signs (including producing the two-handed manual alphabet with only the dominant hand)
- Reduced specification of the location of signs
- Greater use of "role shift" or characterization used in reported speech
- Greater use of spatial and temporal structures for textual cohesion and segmentation (rather than overt lexical markers such as NOW or the indexing seen in more formal discourse)

When considering register variation in BSL, it is important to note that many deaf people live and work in a society where BSL is used in only a limited range of contexts. The rules of formality in English governing how parents, parents-in-law, teachers, clergy, judges, and higher status work colleagues are addressed are not present in BSL, since for most deaf people, all such interactions are conducted in English. Even more general variants such as "conversing with elders" are not relevant for some signers. James (2001) has described the lack of experience of younger members of the black deaf community in signing to older black deaf BSL users because there is no older generation.

As the use of BSL becomes more accepted and widespread, and as interpreters are more widely used in different settings, new register variants of BSL are developing. Greater use of BSL in higher education settings has led to deaf people and hearing interpreters working together to create new BSL vocabulary for new concepts, and the increased presence of deaf professionals has led to new contexts for BSL use.

6.6 Aesthetic Use of BSL

Just as there are aesthetic uses of English, so there are culturally recognized aesthetic uses of BSL. The British deaf community has a strong tradition of storytelling, and skilled storytellers are known and respected for their use of BSL. Skilled narratives in BSL make great use of characterization, using facial expressions and body movements to give color to the characters in the narratives. BSL stories often contain detailed descriptions of the appearance and behavior of the characters. Narratives generally contain many more "productive" (cf. Brennan, 1992) signs than non-narratives and these productive signs are frequently morphologically complex verbs that are created ad hoc during the narrative to show the location and movement of particular objects in the space of the story. Ability to use detailed spatial description and accurate characterization is important, coupled with clear textual cohesion.

Storytelling was once an important part of school life, as children signed to each other in dormitories away from adults (Ladd, 2002). It was also a part of deaf club life. With the closing of deaf schools and declining attendance at deaf clubs, this is changing. However, national deaf festivals still preserve storytelling and the increased use of video allows the preservation of nationally acclaimed BSL storytelling and its transmission to much wider audiences.

Sign language poetry is also a small but important use of aesthetic BSL. BSL poetry makes use of parallelism at many levels and the form of the language used brings out extra meaning and symbolism.

Because of the essentially simultaneous nature of the sublexical components in sign languages, there are not exact equivalents of "rhyme," "assonance," or "alliteration" in sign language poetry. However, the sign poet may use signs that share the same handshape or the same location or the same patterns of movement in the sublexical components to create equivalent repetitive effects. Dorothy Miles, the first BSL poet, noted in her unpublished notes on poetry composition that repeated handshapes produce stronger "rhymes" than repeated location or movement, although in general the more parameters shared by two signs, the stronger the "rhyme."

Specific timing patterns of signs also create poetic rhythms. Sign poems also make unusually regular use of both hands, as the use of the non-dominant hand is increased to create extra symmetry and balance in the poem.

Sign language poetry not only uses repeated sublexical components to enhance the meaning, but it also selects signs – or elements of signs – that deviate from everyday non-poetic language. Poetic language that is "irregularly deviant" uses neologisms, blends or "morphs" signs in order to create a smooth flow from one to the next, and it can create ambiguous signs whose different possible interpretations lead to extra poetic significance. Neologisms can also be accompanied by unusual use of eye-gaze or unusual use of the signing space. In all these instances, the rules of the language are broken (or sometimes, merely "bent") for poetic effect.

Dorothy Miles, arguably the British deaf community's finest poet, originally began composing ASL poetry during her time in America. Throughout the 1980s, however, until her death in 1993, she composed many fine works in BSL. Her earlier work was quite heavily influenced by English but her later, more "mature" sign poems are entirely free from English influence. A brief description of her BSL poem "To a Deaf Child" (Miles, 1998) will illustrate some of the points made above. The poem celebrates sign language, and its message concerns the ease of communication for deaf signers, contrasting this with the problems caused by the inaccessibility of speech to deaf people.

The poem contains many signs made using the handshape of the closed hand with only the index finger extended. This "pointing" handshape is used for referents that the language treats as being essentially "one-dimensional" (e.g., a person, a fence post, or a screwdriver). Here, by metaphorical extension, the handshape is used for signs relating to the hearing world (such as VOICE, SPEAK, HEAR, EAR, IGNORE, LIP, SAY, and SOUNDS). Another dominant handshape is the flat open hand with fingers spread or together, which is used in BSL for more solid referents (e.g., a table, a wall or a box). These handshapes are used in the poem in signs relating to the deaf world (such as SIGN, HAND, LIGHTLY-GIVE, BUTTERFLY, CLEAR, and MEANING). The clear contrast between the handshapes provides a metaphor for the "thin" hearing world and the "solid" deaf world.

Close "rhymes" are also seen in the simultaneous signs found in the poem. These simultaneous signs occur to link and contrast certain ideas. Thus HEAR and UNDERSTAND are articulated at the same time, as are NOTHING and IGNORE. In the first of these pairs of simultaneous signs, the handshapes are very similar and, additionally, the locations are similar and contrast on opposite sides of the head. The movements also contrast: in HEAR the movement is toward the head and in UNDERSTAND it is away from the head (Figure 6.2). In the second pair, the handshapes are maximally different, the orientation of the palms is maximally contrasting and both move away from the head to be located in opposing locations, balanced in signing space (Figure 6.3). This use of signs is highly "deviant."

HEAR UNDERSTAND

Figure 6.2 Simultaneous signs for HEAR and UNDERSTAND

IGNORE NOTHING

Figure 6.3 Simultaneous signs for IGNORE and NOTHING

WORD

WORD-IMPRISONS

Figure 6.4 Metaphor using signs for WORD and IMPRISONS

An example of morphing and ambiguity is seen in the metaphor that Miles uses to describe the way that the spoken word imprisons a person who cannot understand it. The BSL sign WORD is made with the thumb and index finger extended and curved so that together they create a "C" shape (with the remaining three fingers curved to the palm). In the poem, the sign WORD moves and the handshape locks against the wrist of the other hand, literally imprisoning it (Figure 6.4).

Poets on both sides of the Atlantic see Miles' work as the foundation for modern sign language poetry. Sign language poetry is now an area of growing interest for those concerned with the aesthetic use of BSL, and several organizations run sign language poetry workshops to encourage composition. Criticism and metacriticism of sign language poetry is only a recent development in sign linguistics and deaf studies, but it is an area of increasing interest (e.g., Taub, 2001; Sutton-Spence, 2001).

6.7 Encounters between Deaf and Hearing Communities

There are many instances of conflict and misunderstanding arising between deaf and hearing people. Much of the time these arise from their very different

experiences of life within British society. The British deaf community shares life experiences and culture, but these are embedded within the hearing world. When hearing people do not appreciate deaf values and the importance of certain behaviors, friction and even hostility can occur.

Perhaps the area where such conflict is greatest is in the area of language. Young, Ackerman, & Kyle (1998) studied the use of sign language in the workplace (in psychiatric units for deaf people and in a school for deaf children), exploring the role of signers as not only service users but also as service providers. The signing skills of deaf staff were far superior to those of their hearing colleagues. These skills were especially important for communicating with mentally ill deaf people or with deaf children. Despite this, the deaf staff had lower-grade jobs than the hearing staff, although the delivery of services depended on deaf staff and their cultural and linguistic skills. They thus had low status, but high value.

Since only a BSL linguistic environment provided deaf staff with full access to information at work, hearing staff were required to use BSL at all times when a deaf person was present or might be present. Deaf and hearing people differed in the way they viewed this policy. For deaf staff, signing promoted involvement, making deaf people feel confident, valued, and respected, and with a sense of well-being; signing promoted the development of personal and social relationships between deaf and hearing people; signing enabled deaf staff to fulfill their professional roles and responsibilities.

In contrast, for hearing staff, signing caused lack of confidence, and worries about linguistic competence; hearing people felt that the pressure to sign was sometimes too great. When they were tired, distracted, or under pressure, they reverted to English.

A clear signing policy, good training, and a supportive environment encouraged hearing people to sign. This increased recognition of the role of sign language within the workplace, for the benefit of both employees and service users, is a positive step.

6.8 Language Planning and Standardization

One of the causes of change in sign languages has been language planning. The great sign language enthusiasts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the Abbé de L'Epée in France, and Thomas and Edward Gallaudet in America, created new signs and morphological markers to create a system of signing which matched the structure of the spoken language of the country.

The changes have not been as long-lasting as the planners expected. Those who have invented new signs or sign systems (new manual alphabets or entirely new communication systems such as the Paget Gorman Sign System or Seeing Essential English (SEE)) have not found them accepted by deaf communities.

There are occasional influences from artificial sign systems on sign languages. For example, the Paget Gorman sign "animal" has been borrowed by some

BSL signers. Other signers have borrowed the sign's form, but with the meaning "the Paget Gorman sign system."

Another cause of language change is standardization, yet it is by no means clear that there is a standard form of BSL. While standard varieties of English are taught to second language learners of English, learners of BSL learn local dialects of BSL, often taught by tutors with no formal training qualifications (Dye & Kyle, 2000). The standard for English is validated by its status in dictionaries (non-standard word forms listed in dictionaries are marked as non-standard). However, there is no written form of BSL, BSL has only recently begun to be taught in schools after a 100-year gap, and it is rarely taught to children by native users. There is only one BSL–English dictionary (Brien, 1992), and it includes a limited number of signs. While standard varieties of English are used on broadcast media, there is no standardized variety of BSL on television and deaf television presenters use their own regional signs (Steiner, 1998).

Despite the degree of variation, there is no doubt that British deaf people recognize BSL as one language. It is possible that some form of Standard BSL is slowly emerging, but as yet there is no certainty of when this will happen or what the standard will be like.

6.9 Learning BSL

Despite the limited acceptance of BSL by educators, there has been an enormous increase in the numbers of hearing people learning BSL in recent years. This can be seen from Figure 6.5, which shows the rise in the numbers of students taking national examinations offered by the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People at Stage 1, 2, and 3. BSL is now the second most popular vocationally related evening class subject in the UK after First Aid.

Training for teachers of BSL is very limited, with only brief courses, training tutors to deliver a single curriculum to hearing adult learners. There is no formal training for those concerned with teaching BSL to deaf children or their parents, for example.

6.10 BSL–English Interpreters

The increase in numbers of students taking BSL courses has not been matched by an increase in the number of BSL–English interpreters. Indeed, the shortage of interpreters is one of the most serious problems facing the deaf community, since interpreters enable access to communication with the hearing world. The Digital Broadcasting Act requires the provision of BSL on 5 percent of all digital terrestrial programing. The Disabled Students Allowance provides funding for sign language interpretation for undergraduate and postgraduate

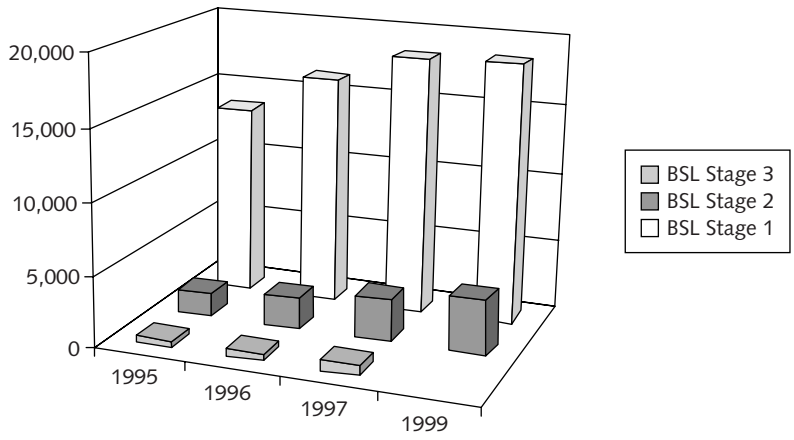


Figure 6.5 Number of students taking BSL exams

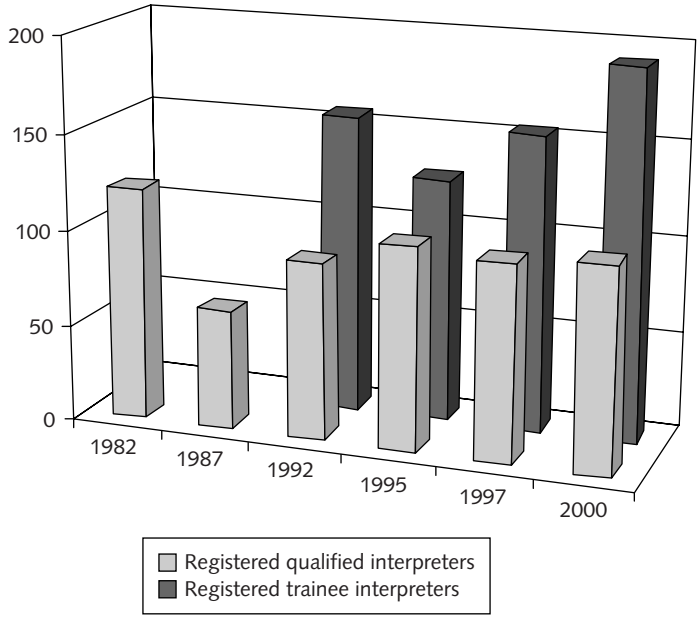


Figure 6.6 Number of registered qualified and registered trainee interpreters

students, and the Disability Discrimination Act requires the provision of sign language interpretation by firms and government for publicly available services. However, as can be seen from Figure 6.6, there has been virtually no increase in the number of qualified sign language interpreters over the past 17 years.

BSL–English interpreting has undergone great changes over the last two decades. In the past, the role of "go-between" between hearing and deaf people was taken by hearing members of a deaf person's family or by missioners to the deaf. The missioner to the deaf was concerned with the welfare of deaf people within his parish and was one of the few members of society with any social standing who could sign. He would be called upon to interpret, for example, when a deaf person went for a job interview or wished to resolve a dispute with hearing neighbors. Deaf people used the missioner as an interpreter and also frequently as an ally, adviser, and advocate. As connections between deaf communities and the church weakened, this task was taken on by social workers for the deaf (Brennan & Brown, 1997). (The sign SOCIAL WORKER is derived from the old sign MINISTER because of their similar role in deaf life.) Social workers for the deaf and missioners for the deaf often came from deaf families and lived and socialized with members of the deaf community. There was no sign INTERPRET at this time in BSL, and deaf people would simply use a phrase such as MISSIONER SIGN FOR ME.

Professional BSL–English interpreting evolved out of this, beginning in the early 1980s, with the establishment of the CACDP (see above). Professional interpreters were seen as a step toward empowerment of deaf people. These interpreters had undergone formal linguistic and interpreting training and did not make decisions for deaf people or advise them, but merely relayed information between the two languages, comparable to spoken language interpreters. Professional BSL–English interpreters were encouraged to operate solely as "conduits" for the languages, and to be socially and emotionally neutral throughout their work.

This shift from the "traditional" style of interpreting to "professional" interpreting did have benefits, especially in avoiding the dangers of patronizing or controlling the deaf client. Modeling professional sign language interpreting on theories taken from the well-established and well-respected fields of spoken language interpreting aimed to raise standards and the status of the language and the interpreters. In many ways this has been successful; however, "professional" interpreting has not been an unqualified success, and the interpreting profession has begun to re-assess the impact of adopting this wholesale application of theory from one field to another.

The effect of this shift has been summarized by Pollitt (2000), an interpreter and interpreter trainer. She notes that many deaf people do not like the professional approach, and see interpreters as "cold" or "unhelpful" and unacceptably "impersonal." Some people (especially older deaf people) *want* advice, support, and explanation that go beyond a mere transference of a message, and they continue to use family members or social workers instead of "professionals" for this reason.

Further problems have arisen from the way that interpreters are trained. With interpreter training moving out from the community and into university settings, many members of the deaf community feel that interpreters (now often from hearing families) no longer have in-depth knowledge of the deaf

communities where they work. Subtle language nuances, contextual information, complex social relationships between the parties, and specific language skills of a deaf client are only learned through long-term, committed relationships with a community, such as missioners and social workers had. Interpreters may cover much wider areas of the country and have far less daily interaction with their clients.

Interpreters are now beginning to recognize the need to adapt other models of interpreting to the specific needs of the deaf community today. There is call for a more flexible approach, incorporating ideas from both the "traditional" and the "professional" approaches.

Most discussions of BSL–English interpreting assume that the interpreter will be hearing. Clearly there are many situations where the interpreter must be hearing because translation between spoken English and BSL is required. However, there are increasing numbers of deaf interpreters, particularly in legal and media settings.

In legal settings, deaf interpreters often work as "relay" interpreters. For a variety of reasons, a deaf person in court may not understand the signing of a hearing interpreter (for further consideration of this topic, see Brennan & Brown, 1997). In such situations a deaf relay interpreter may be called upon to act as an interface between the interpreter and the deaf client, modifying the interpreter's BSL so that the deaf client can understand it. The relay interpreter also interprets the deaf client's signing into a form of BSL more easily rendered into spoken English by the hearing interpreter.

Increasingly, deaf interpreters are also working in the media, providing BSL translation of pre-recorded programs or pre-prepared live programs (especially regional television news bulletins). In these settings, the deaf interpreters work from written English scripts and autocue. At present, there has been little formal research on the differences between hearing and deaf interpreters on television from the point of view of audience satisfaction.

Another solution to the chronic shortage of interpreters might lie in the current experimental use of computer generated signing avatars. Although still in early stages of development, research is currently underway to use text-driven computer translation from English to BSL for applications such as alternatives to text on Internet pages (Hanke, 2002).

6.11 Official Recognition of BSL

The British deaf community has been campaigning for many years for official recognition of BSL. With the recent signing by the government of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the campaign has moved toward seeking the inclusion of BSL on the Charter list of minority languages, in order to ensure adequate funding for training and provision of interpreters and acceptance of BSL in public settings such as the law and education. This campaign has made only limited progress to date, but some official recognition is

likely to be extended within the next few years. As well as increasing provision of interpreters and protecting signers' linguistic rights, recognition is likely to lead to standardization.

6.12 Conclusions

The history of BSL, like that of many minority languages, cannot be separated from a study of its relationship with the majority language community which surrounds it. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are two contrasting futures. On the one hand, there are pressures, such as the decrease in opportunities for deaf children to use BSL with their peers as a result of the move to mainstream education, and a possible decrease in the deaf population as a result of medical intervention and advances in genetics. On the other hand, there is increased interest and demand from the hearing community for courses in BSL, increased use of BSL in public contexts such as television, and increased pride of the deaf community in their distinctive language and culture. Although the social circumstances of the language are changing, there is every probability that BSL will continue to be a living language.

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