Sign languages and sociolinguistic typology

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This paper sets out to examine the possible relationship between proposed social determinants of morphological complexity (Trudgill, 2011) and the typological nature of the sign languages of deaf communities. We sketch how the notion of linguistic complexity applies to sign languages, with a focus on British Sign Language (BSL) and Auslan (Australian Sign Language). First, both BSL and Auslan exhibit low levels of irregularisation. There is a small set of related irregular negative forms in each language, for example, but many other grammatical forms appear predictable. Second, there is limited morphological opacity: the relationship between form and meaning in BSL and Auslan is often relatively transparent. Third, there is limited syntagmatic redundancy, with plural marking of most nouns being optional, for example, although there are two subsystem of verbs which share some characteristics with agreement and classifier systems in spoken languages. Fourth, there is limited marking of morphological categories: neither BSL nor Auslan employ morphological markers for gender, tense, or voice, while the marking of aspect, for example, does not appear highly grammaticalised. Overall, it might be argued that BSL and Auslan are – as has also been claimed for American Sign Language (ASL) by Liddell (2003) – inflectionless languages (although for a different view, see Aronoff, Meir & Sandler, 2005).

Previous analyses have compared BSL and Auslan grammar to spoken language creoles (Ladd & Edwards, 1982; Johnston, 1989), based on the assumption that these sign languages are relatively young languages (it is widely assumed that they have their roots in the sign language which emerged in the 18th century with the establishment of schools for deaf children in Great Britain). However, the unique sociolinguistic situation of sign languages in which only a minority of signers (possibly no more than 5% of the adult deaf community) acquire BSL and Auslan as a first language from signing deaf parents may also be relevant here, as has been noted for other sign languages (e.g., Fischer, 1978, for ASL). Many deaf adults acquire BSL and Auslan from other deaf children in primary or secondary school, or in early adulthood. Some of these deaf adults may not have fully acquired English, and thus have learnt these sign language varieties as delayed first languages (e.g., Emmorey, 2002).

Additionally, Trudgill (2011) has suggested that key social characteristics of communities may influence the typological nature of the community’s language. Although deaf communities are small and involve dense social networks (both social characteristics that may lend themselves to linguistic complexification), the highly variable nature of the sign language acquisition process for most adults may also mean that there is ongoing contact between native signers and the majority of deaf individuals who only acquire sign languages in later childhood and early adulthood, a factor that may work against the emergence of linguistic complexification. Together with language age and the iconic properties of language in the visual-gestural modality, this key social factor may contribute to the nature of sign language grammar in a way perhaps not fully appreciated until now.
References


