



**DGfS-CNRS Summer School on  
Linguistic Typology  
Course “Sign Language Typology”**

**Sign languages in village communities**



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**Topics**

- What do we know about sign languages in village communities?
- What is the significance of these languages for the typological study of sign languages?
- Are there issues of broader theoretical significance raised by these languages?
- How could these languages be better documented and what are the issues involved in their documentation?

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**State of knowledge about village  
sign languages**



We have some socio-cultural and anthropological information about “deaf villages”.

We have very little linguistic documentation of village sign languages.

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## Known “deaf villages” around the world



## Significance of village sign languages for sign language typology



Village sign languages have the same significance for sign language typology as “exotic” spoken languages have had for spoken language typology.



## Case study: The use of space in Kata Kolok



## Uses of sign space

- Topographical use
- Metaphorical use

– Use the sign space to talk about spatial relationships

– Use the sign space to talk about non-spatial concepts

- time
- transitivity
- logical relations

urban sign languages

Kata Kolok  
(absolute space)



## The absence of time lines in Kata Kolok



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## Localisation and absolute spatial reference system



## Absence of agreement verbs:

- |                        |                             |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| MONETARY-TRANSACTION   | ‘buy, sell’                 |
| SIGN-COMMUNICATIVE-ACT | ‘say, tell, ask, inform...’ |
| KNOWLEDGE-TRANSFER     | ‘teach, learn’              |
| SEE                    | ‘see’                       |
| REQUEST                | ‘ask for, request’          |
| GIVE                   | ‘hand over, give’           |

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N.B.: Adamorobe Sign Language:

Does have agreement verbs, but lacks a system of whole-entity classifiers (Kata Kolok does have whole-entity classifiers).



## **Issues of broader theoretical significance**

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## **IS LANGUAGE GRADUAL?**



We know that many (if not most) phenomena in language are gradual (e.g. fuzzy categories, grammaticalization). However, we do not usually think of language itself as something gradual.

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## NOT LANGUAGE

pantomime      home sign

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## LANGUAGE

sign language

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Characteristics of home sign:

- isolated signer, no language community using the visual communication system
- no time depth, communication system established within one person's life time
- idiosyncratic, conventions not shared among a group of people
- limited in what can be communicated



pantomime      home sign

WHAT IS  
IN BETWEEN?

—  
“communal  
home sign”

sign language

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## Sub-questions:

- At what stage can a communication system be called a “language”?
- How long does it take for a language to develop?
- How many individuals does it take to evolve a language?
- What is the linguistic status of communal home sign systems?
- What is the cognitive effect of using a communal home sign system as primary/only means of communication?
- Can comparisons with spoken Pidgins and Creoles be helpful?

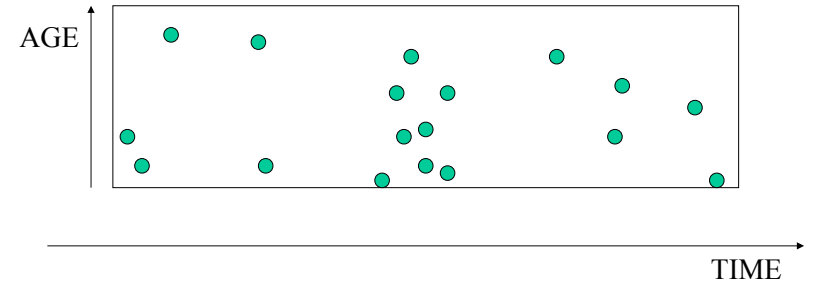
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## Example scenarios



Small local community of users, stable over a long time

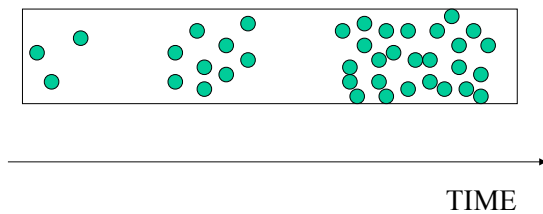


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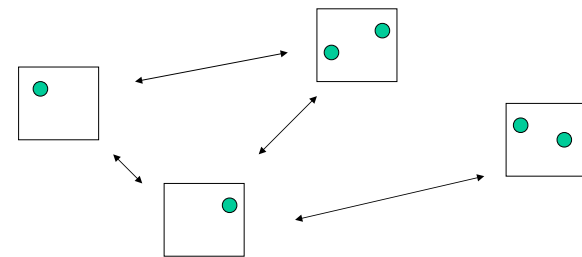
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Sudden growth of signing community



Isolated signers in sporadic contact over a long time



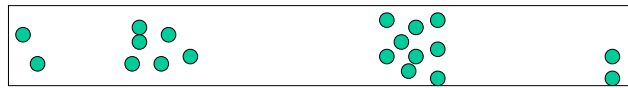
→ Can a system be maintained across space? How much distance before the system is disrupted?

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Temporarily interrupted presence of signers



→ Can a system be maintained across time? How much distance before the system is disrupted?

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## Towards a better documentation of village sign languages

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## From the researcher's point of view

- What disciplines should be involved?
- Which research questions should have priority?
- What kind of data should be gathered?
- How should access to data be regulated?
- What analysis tools could be used?
- How can informed consent be insured?
- What role does language endangerment play?

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## From an ethical point of view

- Should language preservation and revitalisation be attempted, and how?
- How should the communities of sign language users benefit from the research?
- Should we set up educational programs for the signers, and what kinds of programs?

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## From the village community's point of view

- What about ownership rights, informed consent and control over research resources and results?
- What impact would research have on the identity of the village community?
- What impact would educational provisions for the deaf villagers have on them and on the community?



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