**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.
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
  - Use the sign space to talk about spatial relationships

- Metaphorical use
  - 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

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’
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

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.
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

**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?
Example scenarios

Small local community of users, stable over a long time

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?
Temporarily interrupted presence of signers

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

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?

Towards a better documentation of village sign languages

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?
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?

References:


