Making Contact Through Signed Languages


This volume of the *Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities* series focuses on contact between signed languages and its effects, including creation, borrowing, and attrition. In the introduction, Quinto-Pozos reviews research on contact between signed and spoken languages which results in contact signing, code switching, fingerspelling, and mouthing of spoken words and contact between signed languages which can also produce interference, that is, use of handshapes or nonmanuals from one signed language when producing another.

Two contributions discuss lexical creation in signed languages. McKee, McKee, Smiler, and Pointon describe struggles of Deaf Māori to create cultural signs in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Five types of Māori signs are identified: (a) native signs within NZSL, (b) semantic loans, that is, NZSL signs with Māori mouthing, (c) loan translations, for example, fingerspelled initials of Māori words or Māori words translated into NZSL signs, (d) neologisms, that is, newly coined signs based on iconicity or combining existing NZSL morphemes, and (e) substitutions, that is, signs coined to replace conceptually or culturally incorrect Māori signs. Hoyer describes the emergence of Albanian Sign Language (AlbSL) after the collapse of Communism in the 1990s. A school for the deaf that opened in 1960 mainly used oralism and fingerspelling. Thus, the roots of AlbSL came from lexicalized fingerspelling, initialized signs, and native signs based on hearing culture’s emblematric gestures, but lexical items are being added through borrowing from International Sign and other signed languages.

Two other contributions also focus on borrowing. Davis compares lexical items from North American Indian Signed Languages to historical records of ASL and concludes that ASL and Indian Signed Languages (with lexical similarities around 50%) have a history of contact and borrowing. Sasaki’s lexical comparison of Japanese Sign Language (JSL) and Taiwan Sign Language (TSL) finds that 55.4% are phonologically identical or phonologically similar, that is, only differ in one parameter. Of the phonologically similar signs that differ in handshape, the TSL signs are often more complex, for example, they use different handshapes on each hand, have hand internal movement, and use more difficult handshapes. He concludes that complexities in TSL are remnants of an older form of JSL based on a tendency for transplanted languages (such as JSL in Taiwanese deaf schools during Japanese occupation) to change more slowly.

The remaining two contributions describe attrition in signed languages. Ann, Smith, and Yu also examine TSL but focus on a school for deaf students (Ch’iying School) that used Signed Mandarin and Mainland China Sign Language (MCBL) from 1950 to the 1970s. They interviewed five former students and found almost complete attrition of MCBL in favor of TSL. Yoel addresses attrition of Russian Sign Language (RSL) in immigrants to Israel. When Deaf Russian immigrants were asked to use RSL to name objects, they showed interference from Israeli Sign Language (ISL) through intrusion of ISL signs, substitution of movement or location from the ISL sign in the RSL sign, use of Hebrew mouthing with the RSL sign, fingerspelling a Russian word even though an RSL sign exists, and failing to produce a sign for a concept.

In sum, this collection of articles addresses common outcomes of language contact (creation, borrowing, and attrition) but with effects unique to manual communication.

Shannon Casey
Human Development Program
University of California, San Diego