Emergence and Evolutions: Introducing Sign Language Sociolinguistics

The very nature of sign languages in society is such that all of the areas of sociolinguistics are relevant to their study (Schembri and Lucas 2015; Roy and Metzger 2014). Sign languages range from national ones such as American Sign Language (ASL; Supalla and Clark 2014); or rural sign languages such as Adamorobe Sign Language used in Ghana and in many other communities, where members of a community, both hearing and deaf, use a sign language (Nyst 2007; Zeshan and de Vos 2012); to alternate sign languages (Kendon 1989) such as Plains Indian Sign Language used by the hearing speakers of mutually unintelligible Native American languages and sometimes used also by deaf members of these communities (Davis 2015).

Sign languages that have emerged in differing contexts have been used on different scales too: rural sign languages are used locally, in wider language ecologies that feature the ample use of gesture (Branson et al. 1999); national sign languages, which mostly emerged in deaf schools and deaf families are widely used throughout countries and beyond national borders (e.g., in contexts of migration); and some sign languages are used around the world in international contexts, most notably American Sign Language (ASL) and International