Introduction: To International Sign

or not to International Sign?

That Is the Question

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While thinking of signed languages as a collective "international lan-
guage" is wrong, this misconception contains a grain of truth: Signed
languages seem to allow communication across language boundaries
to a degree that is inconceivable in spoken languages. Not surpris-
ingly, this unique linguistic fact has long been part of the heritage of
Deaf people, who take pride in being an international community.
Transnational communication, as practiced by Deaf people, has come
to be known as International Sign (IS). While IS lacks the differentia-
tion and efficiency of well-established national sign languages, it is
uniquely successful in allowing Deaf people to overcome linguistic
borders, allowing for the development of a sense of connectedness
between Deaf people of different origins.

> —Signs2Cross, retrieved from http://www.acm5.com
> /signs2cross/international-sign/

The opening quotation is taken from an introduction to the Signs2Cross
project, an online resource to learn International Sign (IS) through the
use of natural signed languages (NSLs) that was developed by several
European institutions. The project is just one of many resources pointing
to increased use of a linguistic phenomenon referred to as *International
Sign* in the international Deaf community. A brief webometric analysis of
the prevalence of webpages that use this term reveals 450,000 results in
Google; "International Sign Language" resulted in another 80,900 hits.
A search for "International Sign" on YouTube results in links to 735,000

videos. Other resources and instances of usage include, but are not limited to the following:

- Online IS dictionaries (http://www.sematos.eu/isl.html, http://www.handspeak.com/world/isl/)
- Information presented in IS on webpages (e.g., World Federation of the Deaf webpage, http://wfdeaf.org; 2010 FIFA world cup match results and summaries; announcements about Deaf community events, such as DeafFest in the United Kingdom, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyEfty_LhXw)
- World and current affairs information presented in IS (e.g., H3 TV, http://h3world.tv)
- IS interpretation of cultural events (e.g., 2015 Eurovision Song Contest, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-wJXREikYo)
- Information translated into IS (e.g., United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, http://wfdeaf.org/human-rights/crpd)
- Conferences held completely in IS (e.g., the Deaf Academics conference, http://deafacademics2015.com)
- General assemblies, committee meetings, and conferences organized by international Deaf associations (e.g., the European Union of the Deaf, the World Federation of the Deaf, and the Comité International des Sports des Sourdes, CISS)
- IS interpreting at conferences and seminars (e.g., http://www.lesico2-conference-paris.com, WFD, World Association of Sign Language Interpreters)
- Research projects (e.g., http://www.ecml.at/F5/tabid/867/Default.aspx) and training programs (e.g., Frontrunners Deaf Leadership program, http://frontrunners.dk/portfolio/3493/, and the European Masters in Sign Language Interpreting, http://www.eumasli.eu)
- Research projects that directly involve IS (e.g., Signs2Cross, http://signs2cross.signwiki.org/index.php/Main_Page; Insign, http://www.eu-insign.eu)

Increased usage goes hand in hand with the growing recognition of IS in more formal contexts: for example, in 2014, the Association International des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC) admitted its first sign language interpreter as a member, who provides IS interpreting in European Commission and European Union (EU) parliament meetings

(http://aiic.net/page/6866/aiic-s-first-sign-language-member-maya-de
-wit/lang/1). Guidelines for remuneration of IS interpreters for World
Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and United Nations (UN) events have
been implemented (see www.wfdeaf.org/databank/guidelines), and the
WFD and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI)
established a working group to develop a new joint system for officially
recognizing and accrediting IS interpreters to work at the United Nations
(UN), in official EU meetings and for official WFD and WASLI business
(Turner & Napier, 2014).

Despite these developments, after conducting a survey of self-identified
experts, the WFD asserted that it does not recognize IS as a language
(Mesch, 2010),[1] and the EUD has also issued a disclaimer to the same
effect.[2] Historically, publications on IS are concerned with its evolution,
linguistic status, nomenclature, or anecdotal reports on interpretation
and functionality of the system. The small number of empirical studies
published to date variously call IS a pidgin (Moody, 1994, 2002; McKee
& Napier, 2002), a *koine* (Webb & Supalla, 1995), and a contact lan-
guage (Adam, 2012), or a lingua franca (Rosenstock, 2004), functional
terms pointing to the widespread use in the international Deaf community
but not defining a linguistic status. Ceil Lucas (personal communication,
December 18, 2013) puts it aptly:

> Look at what human beings are willing to do: do some kind of sign-
> ing, probably different in every venue, and label it IS. . . . [A]s sign
> linguists, we are used to being told that what we are studying is not a
> "real language", even though we have ample evidence from descrip-
> tion and use that it is; with IS, we now have the opposite: we don't
> know what it is, really, but people are obviously quite happy to slap
> a label on it, for a variety of reasons—the need in the community for
> this variety is probably the main reason—a very interesting turn of
> sociolinguistic events.

DEFINING INTERNATIONAL SIGN

In the case of IS, practice is ahead of theory, and researchers are strug-
gling to capture the nature of the subject of investigation. Nevertheless,

1. http://wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/International-Sign-Fee
-Guidelines-for-WFD-Events-Approved-March-2015.pdf
2. http://www.eud.eu/International_Sign_Disclaimer-i-206.html

defining and differentiating factors are starting to be identified. What follows is an overview of key issues in relation to what we *do* know about IS in terms of its history, linguistic structures, function and application, and policy.

History

> Through the language of gestures, which they practice and keep alive, deaf people are able to establish friendly relations across any frontier (British Deaf Association, 1975, p. 1)

Deaf people in the Western and Middle Eastern worlds have gathered together using sign language for 2,000 years (Woll & Ladd, 2003). Stone (2012, p. 981) quotes Michael Miles, who describes the function of deaf-mutes as language brokers in the court system of the Ottoman empire. According to Miles, the Deaf interpreters were brought together from throughout the empire, and thus we can assume that a version of IS was used. Adam (2012, p. 915) refers to Pierre Desloges, who described gatherings of Deaf people from all over Europe in the context of the establishment of the Paris School for the Deaf toward the end of the 18th century, where participants reportedly communicated without difficulties.

The need to standardize an international sign system arose in the context of the founding of institutions and was discussed at the first World Deaf Congress in 1951, when the WFD was formed (McKee & Napier, 2002). In the following years, a form of international signed communication that was mutually intelligible developed as the delegates from different language backgrounds communicated with each other, and in 1973, a WFD committee ("The Commission of Unification of Signs") was established, which sought to create an international language for Deaf people to use (Moody, n.d.). This was done by selecting "naturally spontaneous and easy signs in common use by deaf people of different countries" (British Deaf Association, 1975, p. 2), which were then compiled into a photographic dictionary and published under the title *Gestuno: International Sign Language of the Deaf*. The dictionary contains a vocabulary list of about 1500 signs. The name *Gestuno* was chosen, referencing to gesture and a sense of oneness.

However, when Gestuno was first used at the WFD congress in Bulgaria in 1976, it was incomprehensible to deaf participants (Moody, 2002). The term *Gestuno* fell out of use, and so the book also fell out of favor. Although the Gestuno dictionary has influenced IS lexicon in some con-

texts (e.g., at the Intenational Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) and WFD business meetings), it did not standardize the improvised nature of cross-signing as used informally by Deaf people.

Although a form of IS has been used as the political language of Deaf people (for example, in meetings of the WFD) since the 1960s (Moody, n.d.), the use of some kind of internationally understood gestural communication system has existed for much longer. Moody (n.d.) and Scott Gibson and Ojala (1994) have all described international communication amongst Deaf people as early as the beginnings of the 19th century. Initially, this would have been for sporting or cultural events, but as time moved on and Deaf people became more politically organized on a global scale, the use of this communication mode has moved into the Deaf political arena.

After IS interpretation was provided for the first time at a WFD-organized conference in 1976, it was followed by later controversial attempts that were ineffective because Deaf audiences did not understand them (Scott Gibson & Ojala, 1994).

Nonetheless, perseverance has led to the regular provision of IS interpreting at conferences, using a pool of interpreters who are able to interpret effectively using this sign system mixed with gesture and other resources. Since the 1990s, it is rare to attend international Deaf conferences without IS interpretation being provided.

Linguistic Structures

Webb and Supalla (1994) and Supalla and Webb (1995) described the grammatical structures of IS in an attempt to understand its linguistic status. They analyzed presentations given by Deaf people in IS and concentrated their analysis on five types of negation markers, each of which "is used with remarkable consistency and structural regularity" (Webb & Supalla, 1994, p. 181). As a consequence, they surmise that IS is "more grammatically complex than a typical pidgin" (p. 182). They also found that verb agreement and word order are used systematically, in much the same way as natural sign languages. In further research, Supalla and Webb (1995) identified the grammatical use of space as a structure of IS, which is consistent with other sign languages.

Allsop, Woll, and Brauti (1995) identified some lexical and grammatical features of IS in an experimental study of the production of IS by Deaf people of different countries. They found that the duration of a narrative in IS is longer than its equivalent in native sign languages. They also noted

that the lexical content varies according to the content of a narrative and whether there is an established IS sign that can be used. If not, signers have to decide whether to use a sign from a natural sign language, mime, or use classifiers. An important conclusion of this study is that users of IS "combine a relatively rich and structured grammar with a severely impoverished lexicon" (1995, p. 187).

McKee and Napier (2002) and Rosenstock (2004, 2008) investigated the features of IS as used by interpreters at international events and found a number of structures drawn from natural signed languages (depiction, use of surrogate and token space, nonmanual adverbials, negation, use of facial expressions for grammatical purposes, etc.) as well as features specific to interpretations of IS (larger signing space, slower production rate, clusters of different signs denoting the same concept).

The source of the IS lexicon has been controversial. Woll (1990) found that 70% of all signs in her IS data (collected exclusively in the United Kingdom) were identical to British Sign Language (BSL) signs. Rosenstock (2004) found a substantial number of signs that were considered common and found in sign languages from both Western and Eastern origins (p. 85ff.). Whynot (2015) based her investigation of the origins of IS on American Sign Language (ASL) and Auslan, as well as the Gestuno dictionary (British Deaf Association, 1975) and compilations of IS signs. Results are reported in this volume.

More recently, Zeshan et al. (2013) and Zeshan (2015) introduce the term *cross-signing* to describe the ad hoc "meaning making" between signers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (p. 212). The majority of the 2015 article focuses on the co-construction of meaning; however, the iconic nature of the lexical choices by the participants is discussed in detail.

One of the main issues with discussing linguistic properties of IS (or cross-signing, in the cases of Zeshan et al. 2013 and Zeshan 2015) is the variability of it. While analyses of particular data captured at a particular event of particular presenters or interpreters can provide insights into the idiosyncratic usage of IS and certainly some of the general cognitive processes at work, it is impossible to infer from case studies any generalized properties of a system that might not even be stable enough to be called such, let alone be labeled a pidgin or a language. On the other hand, the instances of IS studied so far reveal a great degree of similarity, something that Newport and Supalla (2000, p. 109) explain: "[C]ross-linguistic research on sign languages does not yet include any languages

that are radically different in typology from ASL. In short, whereas each sign language looks like some spoken language of the world, different sign languages thus far look unexpectedly like each other." Studies of IS can thus contribute to a better understanding of cross-linguistic differences and similarities in the visual-gestural modality.

Function and Application

Until the work of McKee and Napier (2002) and Rosenstock (2004), there were no empirical analyses of IS interpreting. Earlier publications by experienced IS interpreters (e.g., Scott Gibson & Ojala 1994; Moody 1994, 2002) reported on necessary skills and strategies used in IS interpretation. In particular, Scott Gibson and Ojala (1994) stated that to interpret competently into IS, knowledge of the linguistic properties of sign languages is essential. In their view, IS interpreters must draw upon these universal sign language constructs, such as localization, verb modification, question forms, facial expression, negation, borrowed signs, and pantomime, and they need to be flexible and creative in their use of IS.

McKee and Napier (2002) confirmed that interpreting into IS requires a free interpretation, in particular reducing lexical density, adding examples or making abstract ideas more concrete, highlighting salient information, and using local contextual knowledge. They conclude:

> The notion of the interpreter as "conduit" thus does not adequately capture the role of IS interpreters, who clearly engage in a complex decision making process as they filter incoming messages with a higher than normal sensitivity to relevance and comprehensibility in relation to the target audience. Given the unusual communication situation of a linguistically heterogeneous audience and the constraints of a pidgin language, free interpretation is certainly the only method by which this task could be approached. (p. 52)

This mentioned comprehensibility of IS has been analyzed empirically in only three studies so far. Rosenstock (2004) and Whynot (2015) attempt to capture the comprehension of interpreted and signed IS respectively. Both reflect that methodologically this is not easy to achieve (see also Rosenstock, this volume). Zeshan (2015) analyzes in detail the meaning making in cross-signing, where comprehension depends on the co-construction and negotiation of meaning. Given that many settings where IS is used are unidirectional, this process of meaning making is essentially relegated to the presenter or interpreter and is based on assumptions

of what might or might not be understood by the given audience. The relatively weak scores on comprehension measures (Rosenstock, 2004; Whynot, 2015) strongly suggest the need to rethink the quality and usefulness of IS provision in some contexts (but see Best et al., this volume).

Enhancing both interpreter quality and comprehension of IS can be achieved through teaching the basic principles (in the case of the receiver) or complexities of the linguistic properties (in the case of potential interpreters) of IS. Sources for autodidactic acquisition of IS lexicon or structures are now emerging (see the previous list of IS resources). However, formal training courses or a curriculum for teaching IS are not yet established. There are, however, skilled users of IS who offer classes or workshops (see Oyserman, this volume).

Policy

To date there has been very little exploration of policies in relation to the use of IS. The WFD position paper published in 2010 (Mesch, 2010) and the EUD disclaimer (http://www.eud.eu/International_Sign_Disclaimer-i-206 .html) are examples of such policies. Green (2014, p. 445) discusses in more detail the opposing interests of the WFD in regard to language policy and IS. On the one hand, usage of IS is pervasive at WFD events and was determined to be the only means of communication (e.g., at the General Assembly in 2007), practically excluding usage of interpreters into national sign languages. On the other hand, the WFD promotes and supports the recognition of NSLs as part of their mission. Recognizing IS as anything more than a helpful tool in the absence of funds to supply NSL interpreters will endanger the larger goal to promote recognition of NSLs and secure funding for interpreter provision. In fact, Ceil Lucas (personal communication, June 12, 2015) states:

> The apparent need for IS is something that definitely should be explored in more depth—what need do community members, conference organizers, and interpreters think they are meeting and how does this compare to the actual intelligibility and practicality of this entity called IS. In the current climate of the emergence and description of many natural sign languages around the world and in the spirit of diversity and inclusiveness in both hearing and deaf communities, the need may simply be a desire to make sure that everyone is included, that everyone can understand. This is an admirable need, of course, but the studies are showing that IS may not be meeting it. It may be that, for example,

financial support for interpreters of the natural languages at conferences and workshops, for their work and their travel expenses, may be the simplest and best way to ensure that everyone is included and that every language is properly recognized. It may be that that's where conference and workshop resources should go, instead of for the support of IS interpreters. IS may have outlived whatever usefulness it had.

This provocative statement certainly reflects the need to advocate for financial support of NSL interpretation at international events, both as a policy decision and in recognition of the better comprehension of NSLs. Until such time that NSL interpretation is ensured, however, IS is viewed as a solution for inclusion and seems to provide at least a modicum of access. Further exploring the rhetoric around language policies at conferences and in institutions would be a fruitful endeavor to determine attitudes and perceptions of IS.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

This volume brings together a group of contributors who in some capacity are involved in using or investigating IS. A range of Deaf and hearing authors explore a variety of issues with respect to the status, linguistics, and use of IS. To contextualize each of the contributions, the authors were asked to put forth their own definition of IS. In recognition of the many different views, we did not edit the terminology used to denote the phenomena investigated here, and all the authors introduce their own terms. In part 1, we explore the status of IS with a chapter from Martje Hansen, who problematizes the notion of IS and what we mean by it. Part 2 features chapters that focus on linguistic analyses of IS: Lori Whynot analyzes IS lexicon in expository text; Christopher Stone and Debra Russell provide a comparative analysis of depicting signs in IS and NSL interpreting; and Rachel Rosenstock discusses Deaf users' comprehension of expository and interpreted IS. Part 3 includes chapters from contributors who explore how IS is used in context by interpreters and how it can be taught to IS interpreters: Maya de Wit and Irma Sluis focus on the preparation considered necessary by IS interpreters; Brett Best, Jemina Napier, Andy Carmichael, and Oliver Pouliot present a linguistic case study of interpretation from IS into spoken English; Naomi Sheneman and Pamela Collins critically evaluate interpreting at

international events; and, finally, Joni Oyserman provides an overview of considerations for teaching IS to interpreters.

A FINAL WORD

There are topics and people missing from this book: policies around IS usage are touched upon in various chapters (most notably de Wit & Sluis, this volume) but there is no comprehensive analysis included. This is due, in part, to the fact that IS policies are just emerging and are as yet mostly limited to the provision of IS as a means of communication at particular events. We also would have liked to include perspectives from researchers, users, and interpreting practitioners from countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, or South Africa. While the participation of signers from these regions is increasing at international Deaf events (Mori, 2011), research has yet to emerge. Whynot (this volume) has analyzed data from signers and users of IS from these regions, and we hope more studies focusing on multilingual and multicultural events outside Europe, North America, and Australia will follow.

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