



Johanna Mesch

International Sign: Linguistic, Usage, and Status Issues, edited by Rachel Rosenstock and Jemina Napier (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016, 220 pp., Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities Series 21, hardcover, \$80.00, ISBN 978-1-56368-656-6)

INTERNATIONAL SIGN (IS): to be or not to be? Its definition and degree of standardization have been a subject of discussion for more than sixty years. People want to learn International Sign, but they can find neither courses nor native users of IS. Researchers have attempted to study its structure, but does it actually have a syntax? Some people believe that IS will make sign language interpretation unnecessary, whereas others say that IS is not a bona fide language. A number of signers are able to communicate across language boundaries without knowing their interlocutor's national sign language, and many deaf persons use IS as a contact language and want to learn IS interpreting skills. These controversies, questions, and discussions are treated in *International Sign: Linguistic, Usage, and Status Issues*.

The volume is divided into three parts: status, linguistics, and usage of International Sign. Fourteen authors, mostly researchers and instructors in sign language interpreting, contributed the chapters, which contain a variety of views. Although a short description of language status constitutes a substantial part of this book, it also deals with linguistic structures, function, application, and language policies. The introduction, written by the editors, Rachel Rosenstock and Jemina Napier, provides a number of resources and instances of IS usage on websites.

Part one of the book, all of which is written by Martje Hansen, discusses the linguistic status of this type of sign language communication. Its name is not always clearly formulated, but it is typically

Johanna Mesch is associate professor at the Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University.

referred to as International Sign, as suggested at the 15th Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in Madrid, 2007. Earlier names, such as “Gestuno” and “International Sign Language,” have become unpopular today because IS cannot be defined as a full language or a type of gestural communication. Neither can it be called a pidgin or a lingua franca, although it might rightly be considered a functional or situational pidgin. Nevertheless, the use of IS in the international Deaf community appears to be on the rise, thanks to travels, international congresses, and the Internet.

The second part of the book presents linguistic analyses. We learn that IS was created by deaf signers from Western countries, mostly in Europe. It has been increasingly conventionalized and is now beginning to be used in regular international meetings by both participants and sign language interpreters. In the last decade ASL imparted a strong influence on International Sign, but IS is still situated on a continuum between ASL and European sign languages. Lori Whynot’s lexical frequency study of expository IS (unidirectional group communication employed by presenters and interpreters) with regard to national sign languages is interesting reading. The results of the linguistic analyses vary, according to Whynot, depending on the conference at which the data were collected and on the researcher who conducted the analysis. Lexicon and grammar, use of signing space, depicting signs, the use of English mouthings, and so on are several of the issues that researchers have investigated in order to determine which linguistic structures of IS form a conventional language system. Depicting signs, points, and gestures appear much more frequently in IS than they do in national sign languages.

With regard to the third section, which treats the interpreting of IS, it is important to mention that national sign languages (141, according to the Ethnologue database, or about 160, according to the WFD) have not yet been legitimated or accepted in all countries. Many deaf participants find it financially infeasible to bring interpreters to conferences or workshops, and, in any event, interpreting often does not fulfill their expectations of quality. That is why International Sign seems to propose a solution for participating in conferences on the deaf community and sign language-related topics. Most of these events provide ASL interpreting services, but many participants from outside

the United States have expressed difficulties in following “pure” ASL. Researchers are investigating interpreters’ use of IS, trying to find similarities and differences, and evaluating interpreting at international events. Teaching IS to interpreters is a problematic assignment, so the methods and considerations presented by Joni Oyserman provide best practices for interpreters who wish to hone their IS skills. Also, Maya de Wit and Irma Sluis discuss the preparation of interpreters, and Brett Best et al. present a linguistic case study of interpretation from IS into a spoken language, which poses complex challenges to interpreters.

Conventionalized IS differs largely from informal ad-hoc communication when two signers from different countries meet. Even without a shared conventionalized language, signers can develop strategies to understand each other and learn a number of signs from their interlocutor’s sign language. More research about such “cross-signing” (Zeshan 2015) is called for, and we also need to understand better which sign languages are related to each other (e.g., in Scandinavian/Nordic countries, Germany and Switzerland, signed languages in Africa, North and South America, and Asian countries or in Russia and its earlier associated countries). We also need a better grasp of the nature of the contact between two or more sign languages across national borders. For example, in the Nordic countries, standardization was the goal in the early and mid-1900s when attempts were made to unite four sign languages into one. For more than a century, Nordic meeting participants used a “pidgin Nordic sign language,” in which Swedish Sign Language was dominant, but there are no interpreters who can combine four or five Nordic sign languages into one “conventionalized IS.” It is often the case that one or two sign languages are dominant in areas of intense cross-linguistic contact, especially along the borders of countries. This aspect of ad-hoc communication is intriguing from a broader perspective of human communication.

In my opinion, IS can be described as “European ASL,” while cross-signing more aptly suggests a chameleon. Over the course of time, vocabulary changes have occurred, mostly toward greater incorporation of ASL, but in some areas the trend has been in the opposite direction. Language usage in IS is strongly dynamic and flexible, depending on the context in which signers from different national sign languages come together. International Sign has been registered with

the language code ISO 639-3 in the Ethnologue database despite the fact that it is not considered a full language. Why is IS so fascinating for so many people who are looking for the origin of human communication? This book is searching for the soul of International Sign, and it gives some answers, but many open questions remain (e.g., whether IS is only a linguistic activity).

To sum up, this book sets forth many engaging perspectives on IS as a standardized and conventionalized system. Researchers find it exciting to study the extent to which signers understand each other and why IS is used at conferences, workshops, and other gatherings. Scholars in linguistics, sign language interpreting, and sign language teaching want to discover the core elements of IS. In any event, the book does not include the perspectives of authors beyond Europe, North America, and Australia. The results of the individual contributors are clearly presented, but repetitions appear in many sections, for example where different authors come to the same conclusion. This book provides valuable understandings with regard to the reason IS was created and how it is used. The research on IS and cross-signing will never be finished inasmuch as it deals with a situation of language contact similar to the complexity purportedly found in the tower of Babel.

Reference

- Zeshan, U. (2015). "Making Meaning": Communication between Sign Language Users without a Shared Language. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 26(2), 211-60.