Introduction

Sign languages are articulated in three-dimensional space (rather than oral/aural speech), involving especially the hands, arms, and face, but also incorporating body movement, eye-gaze, and other important conventionalized forms, such as the systematic referential use of space. In contrast to spoken languages, sign languages are ideal for communication among people who do not hear or produce speech. Typically, these languages emerge to meet the needs of deaf groups or communities. Some sign languages or signing systems are indeed related to spoken languages (in which case they are usually considered artificial sign languages, see section 1.1 below), but many, if not most, sign languages are independent of the grammatical structures of spoken languages, and therefore have their own linguistic and “speech” communities that warrant linguistic anthropological study. Sign languages allow anthropologists and linguists to explore the nature of language and culture more generally, as well as aspects of language and culture specific to signing communities and deaf people.

A growing body of ethnographic and linguistic studies reveals that the circumstances surrounding the use of sign languages do vary significantly cross-culturally. These studies document a wide range of cultural associations, patterns in social interaction, and ideologies involving language. Historical change in the sign languages themselves, as well as attention to when, where, and how they are used, has demonstrated that the study of communicative practices in sign languages will be a dynamic area of inquiry for quite some time to come. Attitudes about sign languages vary, both internally and externally to the signing communities. While still relatively under-documented, the increasing amount of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies of signing communities around the globe already present data that have required us to update our theories and descriptions of language, as well as our models of deafness so often implicated in those theories and descriptions. These changing understandings, in turn, seem to be affecting the discourse about deafness and signing, both within the signing communities and at political and policy-making levels.

1.1 Types of Sign Language

Scholars have developed a number of terms for the description and analysis of sign languages, as well as the practices and communities of those who use them. Some of the terms are unique to
this topic of study, while others are adaptations or extensions of relevant concepts used elsewhere in anthropology, linguistics, and other disciplines. The development of the terms themselves reflects the theoretical changes in this field over time. Let us start with some of the more commonly used terms, saving some of the more esoteric ones for later when addressing specific topics.

The terms for types of sign languages include natural sign language, artificial sign language (or manually coded language), contact signing, fingerspelling, and homesign. Defining these different terms will help dispel the most common misperceptions about sign languages.

Natural sign languages are complex, grammatical systems with all the core ingredients common to other human languages (Klima and Bellugi 1979). The fundamental distinction between spoken and signed language is that the sets of articulators are different; speech creates sounds via the oral tract, while sign uses hands, arms, face, and other parts of the body to make linguistic utterances. Widespread linguistic recognition of natural sign languages as true, distinct languages in their own right is relatively recent, triggered primarily by the pioneering work of Stokoe and his colleagues (1976/1965) in the 1960s. As far back as the nineteenth century, Tylor (1878) recognized that sign languages used in communities of deaf people do not necessarily match the linguistic patterns of the spoken languages, but not much linguistic work on sign languages followed until the latter part of the twentieth century. Stokoe’s description of what is now called American Sign Language (ASL) revealed systematic linguistic structures and principles that had been previously overlooked, even by its signers and by most professionals in deaf education. ASL clearly demonstrates linguistic principles operating at all the familiar analytic levels seen in spoken language: phonetics and phonology (i.e., articulation), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence-level organization), as well as semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (language as action) – the levels often of most interest to anthropologists, as these levels provide ethnographers insight into the worldviews and social dimensions of human interaction. Once ASL began to be systematically described linguistically, comparable work in other sign languages soon followed. Ethnologue (Lewis, et al. 2014) now identifies at least 138 sign languages around the world, and many linguists see evidence that several others exist that are not (yet) identified in Ethnologue or other catalogues of languages.

Artificial sign languages (such as Signed English, Signed Spanish, and Signed Swedish) are simply versions of spoken languages whose linguistic structures are mapped to visual forms to make them accessible to those who cannot hear them. In effect, artificial languages are codes of the corresponding spoken languages, much as Morse code and semaphore are. Artificial sign languages retain the word order of the corresponding spoken language, and often incorporate sign elements for typical prefixes and suffixes that mark morphology or syntax (e.g., pluralization, part of speech (adverb/adjective), tense). One reason natural sign languages are so frequently overlooked and not recognized in their own right is because artificial sign languages have often been developed to help deaf individuals learn to read, write, and sometimes even speak the spoken languages dominant in their societies, displacing the use of the natural sign language.

Signers will often modify their signing to accommodate those not fully fluent with sign language (or, perhaps, for those unwilling to use a natural sign language; more on that topic below), resulting in contact signing. Like other language contact phenomena, contact signing can involve changing word order or adopting features of another language to make signed communication across a language barrier easier (Lucas and Valli 1989; Lucas, et al. 2001). Such linguistic accommodations are inevitably linked to cultural expectations and social circumstances, and often interact with ideological issues of identity or power, and are likely another reason natural sign languages so frequently go unrecognized as distinct languages.

Fingerspelling is, in effect, another language contact phenomenon. Manual alphabets are particularly common where sign languages are used in highly literate societies. A fairly common
misconception is that sign language is simply a spoken language spelled out on the hands, and 
brief reflection will see that this naïve assumption is similar to the one that conflates artificial 
sign languages with natural ones, as previously described. Some manual alphabets use one-
handed forms (e.g., ASL, Nicaraguan Sign Language, Swedish Sign Language), while others 
may require two (e.g., British Sign Language). Fingerspelling is frequently used between deaf 
and (non-signing) hearing individuals when writing on paper is inconvenient, and the nonsigner 
is familiar with the fingerspelling alphabet, which is usually fairly easily and quickly learned.3 

A feature common to many contemporary sign languages (both natural and artificial) that are 
used in literate societies is the incorporation of fingerspelling letters into signs as parts of those 
words. For example, the ASL sign for library involves the L-handshape moved in a vertically 
circular motion in front of the body; or in Nicaraguan Sign Language, policia (police officer) 
is a P-handshape tapped on the upper arm opposite the signing hand.4 

*Homesigns* are idiosyncratic systems that emerge in circumstances where households or 
communities have only one or a few deaf individuals, and there is little or no contact with 
signing communities. Because these deaf individuals are isolated from exposure to established 
sign languages, new signs are invented to facilitate communication, but these systems are 
typically very limited, both in vocabulary and complexity. Morford (1996), among others, 
has explored homesigns, which in some cases have proved more complex than previously 
believed possible.

When discussing sign language, the term *gesture* sometimes refers to nonlinguistic body 
movements and facial expressions, but also, depending on context, may refer to movements 
and facial expressions that do indeed carry linguistic content. For that reason, we often see the 
qualified terms *linguistic gesture(s)* and *nonlinguistic gesture(s)*. Of course, that raises the inevitable 
question of where that distinction can and should be made (and how), including the possibility 
of overlap.

### 1.2 deaf, Deaf, and d/Deaf

Turning away from terminology used for the signing itself, and towards the communities of 
signers using such languages, we encounter terms associated with deafness: *deaf, Deaf, d/Deaf.* 

The uncapitalized term *deaf* is often used in a way limited to actual audiological status, and 
generally refers to a (measurable) level of hearing that does not accommodate conversation. 
Profound deafness can mean little or no hearing capacity at all, but often individuals will have 
limited hearing in different frequency ranges, only some of which are in the typical range of 
the human voice. The capitalized form, *Deaf,* has been widely, but not universally, adopted in 
the social science literature on deafness and sign languages since Woodward (1972) and oth-
ers introduced it. This latter term generally invokes some cultural or identity elements, which 
can be entirely distinct from an individual’s actual capacity to hear. For example, an individual 
with little or no capacity to hear but unfamiliar with sign language, without an explicit identity 
involving deafness shared with a community of others and without social contact with other 
deaf individuals might be deaf without being Deaf. However, another individual with some 
hearing capacity but having a strong sense of community with other deaf individuals, especially 
if that community has an explicit sense of identity associated with their deafness, might not be 
considered very deaf, but would be Deaf.

Because the audiological and sociological phenomena of deafness are so often inextrica-

ibly intertwined, the orthographically awkward form *d/Deaf* has been adopted to reflect that. 
Eventually, discussions inevitably have had to address the many kinds of Deaf identities that 
have been documented around the world, given the range of cultural associations with deafness
that prevail in various societies. This is an area where linguistic anthropology has been able to make important contributions. Breivik (2005) and Monaghan et al. (2003), among others, have highlighted international and local dimensions of Deaf identities.

2 Historical Perspectives on Sign Languages and Signing Communities

Earlier perspectives on deafness highlight deaf individuals’ often problematic situations within their encompassing hearing societies. Plann 1997 takes us as far back as sixteenth-century Spain, Lane (1984) explores the intertwined history of sign language and deafness in France and the United States, and Baynton (1996) provides an engaging sociohistorical account of sign language throughout US history, and especially as influenced by the international movement to suppress “manualist” pedagogies in favor of oralist approaches intended to develop speech, lip-reading, and writing to best normalize deaf individuals and integrate them into hearing society. (Many of Lane’s contributions address this movement, including the Second International Conference on Education of the Deaf, known as the Milan Conference of 1880, which had broad influence in deaf education.)

Even where signing was acknowledged, it was often assumed to be either of limited or lower linguistic status, or as simply another version of the dominant spoken language (i.e., not as distinct, natural sign languages as discussed above). Later, studies of sign language and deaf interactions have revealed patterns familiar to anthropologists: culturally distinct groups and communities with their own sets of shared identities, traditions, and language, with the linguistic relativity effects that would inevitably follow.

2.1. Linguistic Recognition of Sign Language

In the 1960s and 1970s, we begin to see systematic linguistic attention to sign language and its use. As already mentioned in 1.1 (above), Stokoe and colleagues (1976/1965) demonstrate that sign languages do reveal linguistic principles at all levels, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. Following Stokoe’s groundbreaking work, we see sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic inquiry into sign language (primarily of American Sign Language), much of it addressing variation (Woodward 1976; Fischer 1975, 1978; Frishberg 1975). Woodward in particular focuses on regional variation (Woodward 1973b, 1976; Woodward and DeSantis 1977a, 1977b; Woodward et al. 1976). Woodward also describes what he originally calls Pidgin Sign English (1973a), and is later explored as contact signing (Lucas and Valli 1989; Lucas et al. 2001). Cross-linguistic and historical comparisons begin to broaden the view (Woodward and DeSantis 1977a, 1977b; Woodward and Erting 1975).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the attention paid to sign language(s) revealed that not only are there significant populations of deaf people who use sign languages, but also patterns of practice within these populations that indicate identifiable communities who share norms and have developed sets of cultural traditions. Deaf identity becomes more than an audiological difference “managed” (à la Goffman 1959, 1963) with respect to hearing norms. Sometimes framed in terms of subcultures, at other times as different cultures (and even in terms of bilingualism/biculturalism; cf. Parasnis 1996), the discourse both in academic circles and in Deaf communities begins to change: what it means to be d/Deaf becomes a focus of concern. Sign language becomes both a means of communication within the Deaf communities, as well as a marker of cultural membership.
2.2 Recognition of the Culture(s) of Signing Communities

In the 1980s and 1990s, we see a swell of interest in sign language, and especially the beginnings of fieldwork involving sign languages and deafness in many parts of the globe. Padden (1980), Markowicz and Woodward (1982/1978), Lane (1984, 1992; Lane et al. 1996), Groce (1985), Foster (1989, 1996), Padden and Humphries (1988), and Schein (1992) give a good sense of the sociocultural dimensions, especially in North America. Accounts from the Caribbean (Washabaugh 1986), Ireland (LeMaster 1990), the Yucatán (Johnson 1991), and Kenya (Devlieger 1994) expand the horizons internationally. By the 2000s, we begin to see an even broader international sampling. Monaghan et al. (2003) includes chapters from a range of scholars examining signing and Deaf communities in the UK, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Ireland, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Taiwan, Russia, Nicaragua, Thailand and Viet Nam, Nigeria, as well as regions of the US. Other accounts from Belgium (De Clerck and Goedele 2007), Nepal (Hoffmann-Dillowa 2008), South Africa (McIlroy and Storbeck 2011), and India (Friedner 2013, 2014) continue the trend towards richer, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analyses. Extended ethnographies from Nicaragua (Polich 2005), Thailand (Reilly and Reilly 2005), Japan (Nakamura 2006), provide nuanced and complex insights into not only familiar topics regarding sign languages and Deaf communities, but also more general cultural and ideological issues as they intersect locally with signing and deafness.

3 Critical Issues and Topics

While much of the earlier literature on sign languages and Deaf culture highlights a hearing/Deaf opposition, and is framed in ways most salient to North American audiences, the trend towards a variety of coverage has brought with it increasingly diverse theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Several of these echo themes from many of the chapters in this volume.

3.1 Language Variation in Sign Languages

As mentioned above in 2.1, the recognition of signing as linguistic led to studies of linguistic variation. Many of these studies examine expected sociolinguistic dimensions, how much variation and at what levels (e.g., phonological, syntactic) there is by location, age, ethnicity, or racial identity (Woodward and Erting 1975; Woodward 1976; Lucas and Schatz 2003), socioeconomic status, and gender (LeMaster 1990, 2003), but also some factors particular to deafness, including contact with other deaf individuals, membership in Deaf communities, presence of other deaf family members, and age of first exposure to signing or to Deaf communities (e.g., Woodward and Erting 1975; Woodward and DeSantis 1977b). In the psycholinguistic world, many of the studies focus on cognitive and developmental factors (e.g., Senghas et al. 2005), especially age of first exposure to signing, but also of perceptible forms of articulation, memory, and grammaticization.

As made clear in the Monaghan et al. 2003 volume (among several other sources), special education and deaf schools play central roles in a very large number of the cases studied around the world, in part because they create circumstances for speech communities to form and endure, and also to explain historical connections among the various dialects of sign languages. The concepts of linguistic communities and speech communities, linguistic competence, and communicative competence are usefully applied to sign languages and their communities of “speakers” (cf. Gumperz 1968; Hymes 2001/1972). Documentation of patterns in linguistic
forms and practices themselves then leads us to useful comparisons along the familiar range of theoretical issues shared with studies of so many other languages, including spoken ones.

### 3.2 Models of Deafness

Responding to changing understandings of the socially constructed nature of deafness, the concept of models of deafness emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a rich area of discussion, focusing at first on distinctions between so-called medical (or biomedical) and cultural models of deafness (Markowicz and Woodward 1978; Padden 1980, 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988; Lane 1984, 1992; Parasnis 1996). Medical models of deafness assume the implicit, default perception of deafness as a “defect” or abnormality in hearing, one that ought to be “fixed” by one or more methods. Oralist pedagogies (see 2 above), mechanical devices such as hearing aids, and more recently surgical-prosthetic interventions such as cochlear implants (CI), are adopted as mitigations to help “normalize” and integrate deaf individuals into their larger societies, thereby ameliorating what is perceived (however accurately or inaccurately) as their otherwise inevitably isolated and socially impoverished lives.

Cultural models explicitly incorporate the socially constructed nature of deafness, addressing factors beyond audiological capacity, including ideologies of language, “normal” physiological and cultural human variation, and hegemonic social relations that can and should be questioned, if not reorganized. Not surprisingly, a wide range of scholars and activists draw on ethnographic and linguistic data to challenge uncritically assumed medical models of deafness. Cochlear implants (CIs), especially their implantation in very young children when success rates are higher, have become a flashpoint, as well encapsulated in the documentary video *Sound and Fury* (Weisberg et al. 2000). Some scholars and activists espousing cultural models of deafness describe CIs as a typical medical model response. They argue that CIs are often only marginally successful, but more importantly, are seen as a response to a perceived absence of language and sociocultural interaction only because sign languages and Deaf communities are not recognized and accepted as natural and appropriate responses to deafness by the hegemonic hearing society (cf. Fjord 1999–2000, 2001). When deaf children are allowed to join the communities of Deaf signers, the cultural model holds, their language acquisition and cultural identity develop normally. The tension over CIs is particularly acute because those in favor of CIs point out that early interventions (when deaf children do not understand the implications nor have control over their own implantations) permit more “typical” (spoken) language acquisition, and greater integration with general society. Those opposed to CIs, especially those who have experienced or are aware of Deaf communities and their rich sign languages, sometimes argue that implantations are, in effect, a form of cultural “ethnocide” (Hladek 2002).

Not surprisingly, the simple binary oppositions of hearing/Deaf, and medical/cultural models of deafness are later challenged as insufficient. With evidence from the range of circumstances already identified in 2.1 above, we see that various analytic approaches are needed to explain the cross-linguistic, cross-cultural differences of various circumstances. For example, Polich (2005) proposes *eternal dependent* as another model of limited deaf personhood distinct from the medical and cultural ones previously applied in North America and elsewhere. In this model, Polich focuses on the social agency of deaf individuals and groups, rather than a cultural identity, and explores the often limited agency of deaf people despite their age and cognitive or linguistic capacities; deaf individuals may be relegated to socially dependent positions their whole lives, hence *eternal* dependent. Others see analogies between deafness or Deaf identity and the social and cultural patterns of other kinds of groups and communities. Solomon (2012) proposes the concepts of *vertical identities* (those handed down from generation to generation, with ethnicity,
race, and nationality as archetypical), and horizontal identities (those adopted and developed through experience and association with peers or others with shared traits and circumstances, among them Deafness, Down syndrome, autism, prodigies, gay/lesbian/transgender). Clearly, these identity dimensions will continue to unfold with further cross-cultural ethnographic and linguistic documentation and comparison, including the notion of deafnicity, as discussed in 4.2 below.

3.3 Language and Ideology

Linguistic anthropology is noted for demonstrating that language plays ideological roles, both as markers of identity, as well as the medium through which ideological processes occur. Examination of both form and content of sign language practices continues this disciplinary tradition, and we can see patterns at the macro-level of the ethnographic documentation that bear striking resemblances to what we have seen occur for other languages. As so often seen in inventories of other local languages and their cultures (whether colonial and hegemonic records, or postmodern existential critiques, or even activist lists of languages needing recognition), sign languages have also been categorized as not “real languages” (only gesture or mime, or perhaps broken versions of “proper” [spoken] languages), or “primitive,” or at best expedient means to eventually acquire the target, dominant spoken and written languages. To use signing has sometimes been interpreted as a performative act (cf. Kulick 2003) that marks a deaf individual as an “oral failure” (Monaghan 2003), incapable of mastering the speech of proper society, but that has also brought the inevitable covert prestige of using sign as an anti-hegemonic marker of opposition, perhaps part of the reason ASL was so often cited as a central trait of American Deaf culture (e.g., Padden and Humphries 1988; Parasnis 1996).

Within sign languages themselves, we find signs with ideological associations, both explicit and implicit. For example, the ASL sign for hearing-in-the-head certainly marks a negative association with a cultural identity linked to hearing society. The no-sabe sign used in Nicaragua refers to deaf individuals incapable of using sign language, or even language altogether, which thereby limits their perceived social agency (Senghas 2003). Other signs might appear to be relatively arbitrarily assigned (as are most words in most languages), but might convey some implicit associations that are arguably socially hierarchical (such as the many ASL signs involving gender distinctions made by using base locations higher or lower on the head, such as the corresponding contrastive locations of father/mother and boy/girl).

To help explain ideological behavior associated with languages, Irvine and Gal (2000) have identified the three concepts of iconization (one linguistic form indexing a linguistic or social group), erasure (the ideological “disappearing” of problematic differentiations), and fractal recursivity (patterns in identity/distinction made at one level being applied recursively at higher or lower levels, thus providing a resource for uniting or dividing groups). These ideological concepts can be usefully applied to sign languages, explaining why certain dialects of sign language may receive recognition (whether positive or negative), while others remain overlooked. These concepts can be applied even to cases examining homesign systems in the Yucatán, as Haviland (2014) indicates (see 4.1 below). Irvine and Gal’s (2000) concepts help explain why the patterns of ideologies associated with sign languages and deafness play out in locally specific ways that are inherently part of larger local and regional ideological systems.5

3.4 Literacy, Language Policies, and Pedagogy

Literacy has long been a problematic issue in deaf education (Monaghan 2003; Plann 1997). For deaf individuals, the phonological basis of many writing systems (however idiosyncratic)
makes mapping of written forms to spoken ones difficult, at best. For those deaf individuals who acquire sign language as their first language, literacy in the society’s dominant language(s) involves the simultaneous acquisition of a second language. Most ASL signers write in English, and those two languages have markedly different structures and features. Because of the practicality of literacy, as well as the prevalent ideological associations of literacy with being educated and, therefore, intelligent and civilized, deaf education often uses literacy as a primary measure of educational success. However, many deaf students find themselves in a Catch-22 bind: because their literacy may be limited, the means of learning (books, etc.) are often less accessible to them, or the methods of assessment (written tests) do not adequately measure their actual skills and content knowledge (Bagga-Gupta and Domfors 2003 discusses this particular conundrum as it plays out in Swedish deaf education).

Mainstreaming, especially in the US and some European countries, is another recurring topic of concern in deaf education; in an effort to treat deaf students as equal to their hearing peers, schools have policies of including these deaf students as much as possible in regular classrooms, with varying levels of special support. Most residential deaf schools in the US have closed over the last fifty years, and many deaf students no longer have separate special deaf education day schools available as options. Ironically, deaf students can often feel socially isolated even while physically situated within classrooms of (mostly or entirely) hearing students. These deaf students may be limited to the interpretations provided by interpreters (when available) or teachers, or what limited conversation their peers are able and willing to sign (if any). Even students with Cochlear implants may have only limited ability to follow conversations under ideal interactive conditions, and so these students face communicative challenges that they would not experience if they were in classes with deaf peers.

Nationalist issues are also a factor in the language policies that affect sign languages. Policies meant to encourage fluency and literacy in certain languages associated with national identity, especially in formerly colonial states, will often exclude the local sign languages as an acceptable language for instruction or public use.6

4 Current Contributions and Research

The current geographic range of linguistic anthropology involving sign languages continues to expand, as well as the range of theoretical approaches to studying these cases. Deafness and signing often intersect with other sociocultural phenomena in ways that reveal a number of principles that otherwise remain implicit and obscure. We touch on a few representative examples here; a number of other projects that have been the topic of recent PhD dissertations are beginning to appear as scholarly articles and monographs.

4.1 Linguistic Ethnography of Signing Practices

Ideologies of linguistic practices have been a recurring theme in recent articles appearing in the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. For example, Pizer et al. (2013) explore the expectations as linguistic intermediaries of hearing adults whose parents are Deaf, a topic also addressed previously by Preston (1996). They find an ideology among such families that these hearing signers would naturally accommodate deaf signers through inclusive bilingual practices, a pattern that contrasts with those observed in spoken-language bilingual families. Moving geographically outside of North America and Europe, Hoffman-Dilloway (2008, 2010, 2011) has been exploring the ethnolinguistic politics of Deafness and signing in Nepal, including issues of language standardization and regimentation. Two other interesting cases come from the Yucatán.
Taking Gumperz’ notions of speech communities to their logical minimum, Haviland (2014) examines social interaction within a single family with multiple deaf members. The family has developed an idiosyncratic homesign system, yet Haviland observes familiar ideological patterns even in this “minuscule speech community” that are consistent with Irvine and Gal’s (2000) principles of iconization, erasure, and fractal recursivity. MacDougall’s 2012 dissertation describes the second Yucatecan case, a Chican community with a high rate of deafness, and among which the use of signing is so common and unmarked among both deaf and hearing community members that a distinct Deaf identity does not form. (This Chican case is reminiscent of Groce’s (1985) descriptions of signing practices on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, as well as the accounts of signing among the Bedouins of the Negev Desert [A. Senghas 2005]).

4.2 Deafnicity and Deaf Sociality – Revisiting the Nature of Ethnicity

While Erting (among others) proposed a concept of Deaf ethnicity as far back as 1978, more recently, Eckert (2010) draws on classical Greek philosophical distinctions of hómaemon (common origin), homóglosson (common language), and homóthreshkon (common worldview/cosmology), to clarify the theoretical concept of ethnicity itself, and explain why its application to American Deafness in the form of deafnicity is both useful and appropriate. Eckert’s argument supports previous claims by Erting (1978), Padden and Humphries (1988, 2005), and Lane (1992; Lane et al. 1996; Lane et al. 2011), among others, but also helps clarify why and how ethnicity might be useful in anthropological and sociological studies not involving deafness.

In contrast to Eckert’s deafnicity, which might arguably apply only to situations where ethnicity is recognized locally as salient, Friedner (2014) argues that sociality provides another analytic framework that explains discursive practices of deaf individuals and groups, including Deaf churchgoers in Bangalore, India. The concept of deaf sociality is not mutually exclusive with Eckert’s deafnicity, but may apply better where deaf people “come together to create local moral worlds [. . .] through communities of practice” (Friedner 2014: 43).

4.3 Orthography – Writing in Sign Language

As previously mentioned (3.4 above), literacy has often been a problematic issue for signers. Most signers write in a second language, the dominant spoken language of their encompassing hearing societies (e.g., ASL signers typically write in English, Nicaraguan Sign Language signers write in Spanish, Swedish Sign Language signers write in Swedish [or even English!]). However, Valerie Sutton and others have been developing the Sutton SignWriting system (SW) (http://www.signwriting.org), which is intended for general use (not just linguistic transcription), and communities of signers from at least 30 countries have been adopting SW for written communication in their respective sign languages, including online communities. SW is a visually iconic form of writing that represents the face and body movements used in sign languages (in effect, a visually phonetic writing system).

In addition to her studies in Nepal, Hoffman-Dilloway (2011) has also been analyzing these SignWriting texts, their circulation among those who write and use them, and the metalinguistic discourse about these texts conducted via an e-mail listserv. She argues that the use of SW allows its users to articulate and challenge dominant assumptions and ideologies about language and writing. In one curious twist, Hoffman-Dilloway (2011) discusses the ideological implications of writing SW texts from either the perspective of the signer or from the perspective of the audience observing (and participating with) the signer, essential when performing certain traditional genres recognized within Deaf communities. These particular orthographic distinctions
cannot easily be made for spoken languages, but are among those that can be chosen in SW as a way of performing genre through text.

5 Main Research Methods

In much of the anthropological study of sign languages, classic participant observation (with ethnographic interviews) is typically combined with closer linguistic analysis (cf. Bernard 2011): from phonology through morphosyntactics, semantics, and the pragmatic level of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. The circumstances of many linguistic anthropologists documenting signing practices is reminiscent of the early days of linguistic fieldwork, where often the languages cannot be learned before the fieldworker arrives in the field. Much of the earlier phases of fieldwork are therefore constrained by limited fieldworker fluency in the local language(s), and often there are no professional interpreters available. While fieldworkers who already know one sign language before arriving in the field may have a head start over hearing nonsigners, the differences between sign languages can be considerable, as much as seen in the differences between spoken languages. If that challenge is combined with limited fluency in the spoken and written languages of the field region, that limited fluency in both modalities can compound the difficulties.

However, unlike spoken languages that are often transcribed using well-established conventional orthographies, or even phonological transcription systems such as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and variants of Pike’s Americanist phonological transcription systems, sign languages are frequently transcribed using idiosyncratic systems developed for the specific research projects. Stokoe Notation (Stokoe et al. 1976/1965) and HamNoSys (Hamburg Sign Language Notation System) (Hanke 2004) are two (visual) phonological systems, and the Berkeley Transcription System is meant for transcribing at the level of meaning (Slobin et al. 2001), but differing transcription systems remain an issue affecting comparison of data. More recently, ELAN (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator) (available from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, The Netherlands) is an example of a well-developed set of shared software and transcription tools. ELAN is particularly good for developing tiered-transcription systems that can be tagged to video files, and is especially useful for close linguistic analysis. As mentioned above in 4.4, Sutton SignWriting is a sign writing system based on (visual) phonetic principles that can be applied even to new sign languages without the specific fonts already developed for particular sign languages. It still has a relatively limited number of users, however.

We continue to see in many accounts of sign language the practice of combining drawings of signs, glossing, and the use of translations of utterances; these techniques are easy to adopt and fairly accessible to nonspecialists. In many cases, photographs (sometimes with annotations) are also used. Where multimedia options are available, video clips have proved very effective at showing actual signs, but they do not allow for fully anonymous representation because the signers’ faces usually need to be distinguishable in order to include the grammatical facial gestures and eye-gaze. With high definition (HD) video now commonly available even on mobile phones, video as a medium of documentation and analysis is now affordable and feasible for even the smallest of projects, though acquiring the necessary skills and techniques to work with this medium will remain as a constraining factor.

6 Recommendations for Practice in the Study of Sign Languages

Perhaps the first and most important recommendation to be made to those studying sign languages and Deaf communities is to be mindful of the history of exclusion and, in many cases,
oppression of deaf people and sign languages in many parts of the world. Like the study of other minority and indigenous languages, the research choices have ideological implications, and the accounts produced can have strong ideological effects. Hearing researchers need to be particularly sensitive and responsive to how their actions and accounts may be received by others, especially the Deaf communities studied, but also Deaf communities at home, and by Deaf colleagues. Deaf researchers must also be careful not to project their own experiences, cultural associations, and linguistic assumptions into cases that may have superficial similarities possibly masking deeper, differing principles at play.

Informed consent can be particularly tricky when conducting research in signing communities where literacy may be limited or nearly nonexistent, or where the full implications of consent may not be fully understood due to cultural differences. Wherever possible (and it usually is), researchers should bring their findings back to the communities of study in accessible formats. This practice can increase the reliability and validity of the findings. However, issues of privacy and disclosure can be particularly problematic, especially when sharing linguistic data; revealing facial gestures and eye-gaze, so central to linguistic analysis of signing, also exposes the participants’ faces, jeopardizing anonymity.

On a methodological note, to increase the ease and reliability of comparisons, North American scholars collecting and coding sign language data would do well to consider adopting the ELAN system used increasingly in international circles, especially in Europe (many European grants for sign language work require the use of ELAN). The tools are available free of charge, and can be downloaded from a number of European university websites.

Of course, many of the methodological issues addressed in Part V of this volume apply to the study of signing and Deaf communities; researchers would do well to review those, as well as more comprehensive handbooks on anthropological fieldwork (e.g., Bernard 2011).

Finally, a plea to those coining new analytic terms: please think very carefully before creating terms whose distinctive forms require seeing the terms in print. The use of novel orthography, such as atypical capitalization or the incorporation of various symbols within terms, has reached a point where the use of these terms is becoming increasingly cumbersome, especially during oral presentations in conferences or classrooms, and thereby impeding useful discussion (e.g., d/Deaf and h/Hearing, D/deaf (Eckert 2010); DeaF (McIlroy and Storbeck 2010)).

7 Future Directions

Extrapolations from the approaches and topics already indicated in 3 and 4 (above) will suggest many of the future directions of the anthropological studies of sign languages. In addition, we are likely to see more accounts of the emergence and historical change of sign languages as circumstances allow (e.g., RJ Senghas 2003; Senghas et al. 2005; Hoffman-Dilloway 2011; Haviland 2014). With language emergence and differentiation inevitably arise issues of language endangerment, especially during the phases when the linguistic community of signers is small.

The performativity of deafness and signing, as well as the autonomy and self-determination of Deaf and signing communities, are also areas needing further attention (cf. Padden and Humphries 2005, especially chapters 1 and 8). Theoretical application of deafnicity and Deaf sociality to the analysis of a wider range of cases is certainly warranted, and would likely be fruitful, especially cross-linguistically and cross-culturally.

Media studies and the effects of technology are yet another area with significant and unpredictable promise, though we see inklings of the potential in a recent review article (Lucas et al. 2013). What might be the implications of more broadly adopted sign writing systems or
transcription? Signing is now possible via video telephony and Internet channels, even on hand-held, mobile devices; but what will happen if and when signing becomes as “readable” as text and voice, or when digital avatars can be made to sign?

Related Topics

3 Gesture (Streeck); 7 Language Ideologies (Kroskrity); 12 Language, Sexuality, Heteroglossia, and Intersectionality (Leap); 24 Discrimination via Discourse (Wodak).

Notes

1 For a while, to avoid what at the time seemed inappropriate references to sound, some linguistic terms such as *chereme* and *allocher* were proposed, but these seemed more awkward than useful, so now many of the phonetic and phonological terms (such as *phoneme* and *allophone*) are typically applied to signs, too.

2 Note that to use Morse code or semaphore, one has to convert the written version of the spoken language into the encoded form. An English message in Morse code remains in English; a Spanish message in semaphore remains in Spanish.

3 The Rochester Method basically involves fingerspelling whole sentences letter-by-letter, and excluding the use of artificial or natural sign.

4 The use of small-caps indicates a gloss for a corresponding sign; this is common practice when writing about signs without using esoteric linguistic transcription. The glossed sign might not carry precisely the same meaning or connotation as the English (or other spoken language) word might indicate.

5 The academic categorizations of sign languages and their associated phenomena are not immune to these principles!

6 About every month or two, references to articles appear on the Lg-Policy List of the Consortium for Language Policy and Planning (www.ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/clpp/) that somehow address issues affecting a local sign language. Sometimes the articles announce progressive changes to public policies involving sign languages (especially in public education), but often they decry oversights that inadvertently limit the use of sign language, or even ill-informed policies that explicitly prohibit or discourage the use of local sign languages.

7 The term CODA, Children of Deaf Adults, is often used to refer to this population.

References


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**Further Reading**


An ethnographic approach to local Norwegian situations that are linked to transnational phenomena and resonate with circumstances found in many other countries.


Monaghan, Leila, Constanze Schmaling, Karen Nakamura, and Graham Turner (eds). *Many Ways to be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2003. This volume provides a survey of sign languages and communities from 15 different countries, highlighting their commonalities and differences, and with a useful historical summary chapter by the primary editor.