

British Sign Language Corpus Project: *Documenting and describing variation in BSL*

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British Sign Language Corpus Project



Why a corpus project of BSL?

- Need for more work on BSL vocabulary, grammar, variation and change to increase our understanding of BSL linguistics (more work needed since Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999)
- One dictionary organized according to linguistic principles (Brien, 1992), but fewer than 2000 signs



Why a corpus project of BSL?

- Access to the data for researchers and the Deaf community:
 - Advances in technology make data-sharing possible, using new software such as ELAN
 - To provide evidence and material for sign language teaching and interpreter training
- Language documentation & language change/endorsement
 - To address concerns in British Deaf community about BSL variation and change: heritage forms of BSL not being passed on to a younger generation?

Background: Aims of the BSL Corpus Project

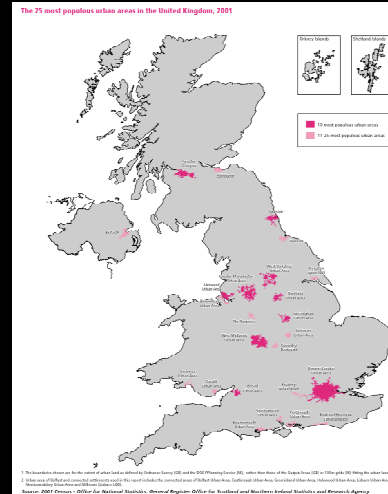
- To create an on-line, open-access collection of BSL digital video data.
- To research BSL variation and change
- Project timeline: January 2008-December 2010

Background: Specific studies

- Sociolinguistic variation and change in
 - (a) phonology: signs made with the 1 handshape
 - (b) vocabulary: 101 signs from BSL vocabulary
 - (c) grammar: sentence structure and different groups of verb signs

Methodology: Sociolinguistic approach

- Film ≥ 30 Deaf native and near-native signers (BSL exposure by 7 years of age) in 8 regions across the UK:
 - England (London, Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle)
 - Wales: Cardiff
 - Scotland: Glasgow
 - Northern Ireland: Belfast
- Total sample of ≥ 240 individuals, balanced for age, gender, language background, possibly social class and ethnicity



Methodology: Sociolinguistic approach

- Why these locations?
 - All are large cities, with 5 in England (South-east, South-west, Midlands, North-east and North-west) and 1 each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
 - All have (or had in the past) a residential Deaf school
 - Limited time and budget so not able to film Deaf people in more places

Methodology: Recruitment & data collection

- Deaf community fieldworkers (cf. 'contact people') recruited 249 Deaf people (minimum of 30 x 8 regions) that match project criteria
- Pairs of signers from the same region and in the same age group
- Lived in the region for 10 years or more
- Filmed over 2-4 visits
- No hearing people present during filming



Methodology: Recruitment & data collection

- Filming session:
 - blue background screen
 - two lights
 - plain colored clothing (back-up T-shirts)
 - chairs without arms
 - 1 high definition video-camera(s) focused on each participant, 1 on the pair



Methodology: Content

- Warm-up activity: 5 minute personal experience stories
- 30 minutes free conversation
- 20 minute interview
- 10 minute vocabulary task

Current status: March, 2010

- Data collection: 249 participants filmed
- Editing video data nearly complete
- Translation work underway
- All variation studies to be completed this year

So what are finding out thus far?

- Lexical variation
 - vocabulary: number signs (i.e., 100 target lexical items)
 - *results from all 8 cities for 20 number signs (signs for 1-20) out of 101 signs*

Number sign task

5, 19, 15, 2, 14, 1,
7, 16, 11,
4, 18, 6, 13, 17, 10, 3,
9, 20, 12, 8

BSL sign variation: *Number signs*

All participants asked to produce their signs for 1 to 20 in a fixed random order, which are coded for:

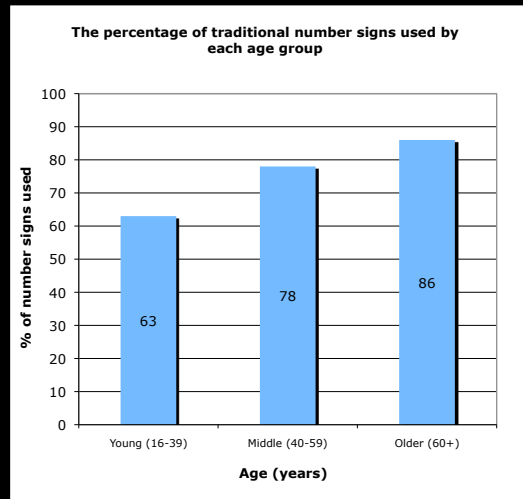
1. Whether each sign is a traditional regional number sign or a non-traditional sign
2. Gender (male vs. female)
3. Age (18-35, 36-50, 51-65, 66+)
4. Language background (parents Deaf or hearing)
5. School education: local or non-local school

Results from 4,233 examples (i.e., number signs 1-20 –except 1,2 and 5– from all 249 participants)

Results: Number sign variation

Factor group	Factor	n	% traditional signs
Age	16-39	1291	62.5%
	40-59	1594	77.8%
	60+	1268	86.5%
School	Non-local	1815	71%
	Local	2338	79%
Language background	Hearing	2862	75%
	Deaf	1291	77%
TOTAL		4153	

Number signs: age differences



BSL Number sign variation and change study

- Number sign use is changing: younger people are using fewer traditional regional number signs
- Some Deaf people with hearing parents and those educated in schools outside of the region where they live also use fewer traditional regional number signs

BSL Corpus Project: Acknowledgements

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