

The SignMorph Project: Documenting and describing diversity in sign languages and signing communities

ABSTRACT: SignMorph is a five-year project at the University of Birmingham, funded by the European Research Council. The project compares a diverse set of languages from across the world: Indonesia, the UK, in Israel/Palestine, Nepal, New Zealand, Portugal, and Guinea-Bissau. We focus on how the different social structures of signing communities impact the structure of their sign language (cf. Trudgill, 2011). For example, signing communities all vary in size: Kata Kolok (KK) is used in a small village of 3000 people in Bali, while British Sign Language (BSL) is used across the four countries of the UK, with tens of thousands of signers. Also, communities differ in how sign languages are transmitted. For BSL, most deaf children are born to non-signing hearing parents, with patterns of language acquisition varying from one signer to the next. In the KK community, both hearing and deaf people use the local sign language (Lutzenberger, 2022). Thus, patterns of language acquisition for deaf children may be less varied.

To investigate how such differences in the sociolinguistic ecology of signing communities impact sign language structure, we are conducting studies on the vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure in different sign languages. In Lutzenberger et al. (2023), we have already undertaken research comparing variation in the vocabulary in BSL, Israeli Sign Language (ISL), and KK – three signing communities of different sizes – and found that BSL has more lexical variation than ISL and KK (contrary to what some previous studies have suggested, e.g., Meir et al., 2012). We are also comparing the use of signing space in narratives in BSL and Kufr Qassem Sign Language (used in a small Palestinian deaf community that is undergoing a language shift to ISL), and preliminary results suggest similarities with documented sign languages (cf., Ferrara et al., 2022). We are also looking at classifier constructions and numeral incorporation in Nepali Sign Language, with comparisons to BSL and New Zealand Sign Language. In addition, we are exploring differences in the structure of personal experience narratives in BSL, Portuguese Sign Language, and Guinea-Bissau Sign Language by comparing the story-telling styles used by men and women and older and younger signers. In this presentation, we will provide updates on all these studies, discuss some of the challenges we have faced in the project, and highlight the importance of language documentation for all signing communities.

KEYWORDS: sign languages, sociolinguistics, typology, language documentation, signing communities