8 Signing in use: variations on a theme

8.1 Sign Supported English

Until now we have concentrated on BSL as the language of the Deaf community. However, many Deaf people use signs in a different way in that the signs, or the lexicon of BSL, are taken in conjunction with spoken English. In the UK, this is generally known as Sign Supported English (SSE). A few prefer the term ‘Manually Coded English’, though this is more widely used in the USA. Although ‘Manually Coded English’ emphasizes the English base of the language, the most commonly used term is Sign Supported English. SSE is communicating using spoken English (which may be voiced or not voiced) but introducing the lexicon of BSL to accompany the English. For a substantial number of deaf people, often those who were educated in spoken English or those who became deaf after acquiring speech, it is their preferred means of communication.

SSE is significant because it is the choice of most educators who advocate the use of signing in education, and until recently was the usual system for public interpretation into sign language. Also, until recently, SSE, because of its closer relationship with English, was seen as having a higher status than BSL. However, research on BSL, which has established it as a language in its own right, has done much to redress the balance.

8.2 Pidgins and creoles

When two languages come into contact, they influence each other. Usually one language is dominant, by reason of being used by the majority or the more forceful group, and this becomes the status language. Members of either group may learn the other language, but more usually they will learn only as much of the other vocabulary and grammar as they need for basic communication. The result is what we call a pidgin.

Where BSL and English are concerned, the situation is more complicated because deaf people are not homogeneous BSL users, and of those who do use BSL, few learned it as a native language (i.e. from their parents). Thus, the BSL/English pidgins should be seen as based on a continuum between the two languages, and people using sign may vary in their presentation along this continuum. Several terms have been created to name the various pidgins, and though these are not officially defined, some attempt to do so will be made here.

British Sign Language

British Sign Language is developed on visual-gestural principles. It borrows from English in using finger spelling, particularly for English personal names. Place names may be finger spelled too but often such finger spelling is done with a pattern that changes it to a sign. The signer may occasionally use an English-like mouth pattern, but the use of BSL patterns is more consistent.
Pidgin Sign Language
This pidgin makes more use of English mouth patterns to match individual signs with words, but still follows the grammatical structure of BSL. It is probably the most widely used pidgin among profoundly deaf persons.

Pidgin Sign English
Moving closer to English, this pidgin incorporates the structure of English into parts of its sentences, and the signer uses many English mouth patterns, but will also change in mid-sentence to BSL structures.

Sign Supported English
This is a form of visible English, in which the signer attempts to match English words with individual signs or finger spelling as closely as possible, often speaking at the same time. BSL features such as placement and classifiers may still be incorporated, but the emphasis is on the English word. This pidgin is particularly used by those who have lost their hearing after acquiring English, or who are speech-orientated by education.

English
The dominant language of Britain. A spoken language using minimal facial expression and few gestures.

It is possible to show these on a continuum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British Sign Language</th>
<th>Pidgin Sign Language</th>
<th>Pidgin Sign English</th>
<th>Sign Supported English</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Because the languages can be combined in this way (unlike spoken languages, although Franglais, in a trivial sense, might be considered similar), the form of sign language that is used between Deaf and hearing people may often be an adaptation, and not pure BSL.

Creoles
A creole occurs when a pidgin becomes the mother tongue of subsequent generations. Once this has occurred it develops in its own right, and syntax and vocabulary evolve. It has been argued that British Sign Language could usefully be considered a creole—Edwards and Ladd (1983) take West Indian Creole as a comparison and draw social and educational, as well as linguistic, parallels between the two languages. It has been suggested that because most deaf children are born to hearing parents, the creolization process takes place again for every generation.

8.3 Signed English
In Sign Supported English, not every single word or inflection (e.g. the 'ed' part of 'jumped' indicating the past tense) is represented by a sign. However, there have been attempts to represent English totally in sign. These have usually developed in an educational context and are known under the umbrella term of Signed English, although there are many varieties, including, in the USA, Signing Exact English (SEE) and Signing Essential English (SEEII). These are almost always developed by hearing people and rarely used by Deaf people.
8.4 Artificial sign systems

There are other artificial signing systems that have been deliberately created, usually for educational purposes. These include Cued Speech and Paget Gorman Signing System. Makaton is also used in education, generally with students with learning difficulties, and makes use of a limited number of BSL signs as part of a structured vocabulary used to facilitate language development. These are discussed further in Unit 5.

9 Sign language acquisition

9.1 Early studies of sign language acquisition

With the growth of interest in sign languages, people also became interested to see whether these were acquired in the same way as speech or in some different way. This section will look at the development of sign language in children acquiring it as their first language, usually deaf children of deaf parents.\(^9\)

The early studies carried out in the 1970s, and mostly in the USA, were largely concerned to demonstrate that sign languages were not inferior to spoken languages and that children acquiring signs reached the same milestones at the same time as children learning to talk. This, of course, was at the time when people were concerned to establish the status of sign as a language. The studies were successful and, in fact, appear to indicate that signs were acquired earlier than speech. First signs were reported at an average age of 10.5 months (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1972) and 8.5 months (Bonvillian et al., 1983), compared with an average for first words of hearing children at 11 to 14 months. Studies of sign language acquisition also report accelerated development through the second year of life with early two-sign combinations emerging before the average age of two-word combinations in children acquiring spoken language. Generally, two-word combinations occur at about 18 months of age. Two-sign combinations have been reported at an average age of 14 months (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1972) and at 17 months (Bonvillian et al., 1983). Furthermore, other research shows that hearing children growing up in a bilingual speech/sign environment almost always sign before they speak.

While these studies may seem to show that sign is easier to acquire than speech, some caution must be shown in interpreting these results. They often fail to take account of the fact that for children developing sign as their first language their early gestures are considered part of their language development because they become incorporated into their later sign language, whereas with hearing children developing speech, their early gestural communication is disregarded.

\(^9\)Note: The d/D distinction is dropped in this section, for the reasons described in Unit 1