Classifications and typologies: Labeling sign languages and signing communities
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Classifications and typologies: Labeling sign languages and signing communities

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There is a growing trend of documenting the variety and complexity of signing practices in the context of diverse sociolinguistic ecologies in which the practices occur in different parts of the world (Braithwaite, 2019, 2020; Ergin, 2017; Goico, 2019, 2020; Green, 2014; Hofer, 2017; Horton, 2018; Hou, 2016; Jepsen et al., 2015; Kendon, 2013; Kisch, 2012; Kusters, 2015; Kusters & Sahasrabudhe, 2018; Le Guen et al., 2020; Marsaja, 2008; Moriarty Harrelson, 2017; Neveu, 2019; Nonaka, 2009, 2014; Nyst, 2012; Nyst et al., 2012; Palfreyman, 2015, 2020; Polich, 2005; Reed, 2019, 2020; Safar, 2020; Schuit, 2013; Zeshan & de Vos, 2012; inter alia). The signing in question may be classified as sign language, gesture, homesign/homesign system, or some variation of one of those labels such as family sign or local sign, according to the scholar’s theoretical views and methodological approaches. Some scholars may classify the signing so as to characterize a demographic element of the signing community such as national, urban, macro-community, rural, village, indigenous, and micro-community. They may also classify the signing to indicate the age or time depth like emerging, new, young, first/second generation, conventional, mature, established, or institutionalized. We inquire whether the existing classifications are most appropriate for referring to different signing practices and what the field of sign language linguistics benefit from such a typology. We also inquire whether the classifications can be improved with more fine-grained distinctions or even reconceptualized and revised to better represent the variety and complexity of sign languages and signing communities. Here we use the term ‘signing practices’ as an all-encompassing descriptor without any assumptions about the linguistic status of these practices (c.f. Green, 2014), given how the terminology used for classifications is theoretically and sociopolitically loaded. This term is reserved for deaf and hard-of-hearing people who use their hands, face, and body to communicate with their interactants, excluding silent and co-speech gestures that occur in the interactions of hearing people only.

In the 1960s and 1970s academia, American Sign Language (Stokoe, 1960; Stokoe et al., 1965) and British Sign Language (Leahy & Brown, 2020) were authenticated as full-fledged languages with their own grammars, not manual derivatives of spoken languages. This kind of authentication led to the establishment of sign linguistics as an academic discipline, giving rise to the practice of assigning nomenclatures to sign languages. The issue of delineating and naming signing practices is discussed in more detail by Palfreyman and Schembri, this issue. The field of sign linguistics yielded more
documentation of signing practices in the 1980s and 1990s from non-Western urban sign languages (Zeshan & de Vos, 2012). This decade also experienced relatively sporadic publications about various signing practices in rural areas scattered across the globe such as the Yucatan Peninsula (Johnson, 1991; Shuman, 1980), urban and rural India (Jepson, 1991a, 1991b), Martha's Vineyard (Groce, 1985), Providence Island (Washabaugh, 1986), Amami Island in Japan (Osugi et al., 1999), and Kata Kolok (Branson & Miller, 1996; Branson et al., 1996). These publications demonstrated that many signing practices occurred in communities without the presence of residential schools for the deaf. Some of these publications also classified the signing practices, although they differed in their approaches. Osugi et al. (1999) use ‘sign language’, ‘home sign system’, and ‘nonlinguistic gestural system’ to characterize three different families’ signing practices on a continuum. Jepson (1991b) use ‘Urban Indian Sign Language’ and ‘Rural Indian Sign Language’ to compare the linguistic structures of signing practices by deaf people in urban and rural areas, respectively; the practices were argued to be products of their sociolinguistic ecologies but were not compared to one another along a continuum or a spectrum, that is, one practice was not considered more ‘mature’ and ‘superior’ than the other. The classification of signing practices expanded significantly, taking on a new direction, in the next few decades.

In parallel from the mid-1990s onward, the study of Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL) gained traction for understanding sign language emergence and the development of complexity in a ‘natural laboratory’, that is, a school for the deaf with critical masses of deaf children with no shared biological kinship ties (Kegl et al., 1999; Senghas, 1994, 1995; Senghas & Coppola, 2001; Senghas et al., 1997, 2004, 2005; inter alia). Then from around the mid-2000s, linguistic work on Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) and other signing practices in rural communities with high incidences of genetic deafness were viewed in a similar intellectual light (Sandler et al., 2005; Senghas, 2005). Both NSL and ABSL are often cited as evidence for the emergence of sign languages in distinct sociolinguistic ecologies. These languages are commonly labeled as ‘emerging sign languages’, a term which has been popularized in Meir et al., (2010) in a Deaf Studies handbook. That chapter is one of the more oft-cited references in contemporary publications that are interested in classifying sign languages and signing communities. Emerging sign languages are situated in opposition to ‘established sign languages’ and these terms have been subsequently adopted and adapted by various scholars (Fenlon & Wilkinson, 2015; Le Guen et al., 2020; Zeshan & de Vos, 2012).

From the 2000s onwards, there was a proliferation of terminology that characterized diverse signing practices and signing communities based on space rather than time depth. Woodward (2000) used the term ‘indigenous sign language’ to refer to a sign language that developed in a village with a large proportion of deaf people, such as Ban Khor Sign Language; this term was later used somewhat interchangeably with ‘village sign language’ (Nonaka, 2007, 2009; Zeshan, 2004, 2006). Other scholars proposed different terms to highlight the sociocultural diversity of signing practices in particular spaces such as Green’s ‘natural sign’ (2014) for the limited repertoire of signs shared by deaf and hearing people in Nepal, Hou’s ‘family sign languages’ (2016) for the signing practices in different families in Mexico, and Reed’s ‘culture’ (2020) for the semiotic repertoire of individual signers in Papua New Guinea.

To date, the majority of research on signing practices in diverse parts of the world has been conducted by linguists and psycholinguists. Many of those researchers did not take an ethno-linguistic approach in their fieldwork, given how their primary research questions concentrated more on documenting and describing selected aspects of the linguistic structure of signing practices. Those researchers relied more on elicitation methods and occasionally spontaneous conversations to analyze constituent order, negation, verb agreement, cardinal number systems, lexical variation, and the adoption and adaptation of gestures for signs (de Vos & Pfau, 2015; Ergin, 2017; Horton, 2018; Hou, 2018; Mesh & Hou, 2018; Mudd et al., 2020; Neveu, 2019; Palfreyman, 2019; Reed, 2019; Safar, 2020; Sandler et al., 2005; Zeshan & Palfreyman, 2020). So there has been more research on the

The same disparity of research may apply to urban signing communities, which are often characterized as prototypical ‘Deaf communities’ and treated as static or stable through by labeling them as ‘established’ (Fenlon & Wilkinson, 2015; Meir et al., 2010). In fact, there has been not much ethnographic research on the majority of signing communities as dynamic, ever-shifting communities of practice, with a few exceptions by anthropologists who have focused on rural signing communities (Hou, 2020; Kisch, 2012; Kusters, 2015; Nonaka, 2012, 2014). Braithwaite (2020) suggests that different signing micro-communities and macro-communities, including Deaf communities, are not necessarily that different from one another. The constellation of multiple issues such as language deprivation, limited access to educational opportunities, and sign language interpretation are not limited to urban signing communities.

The aforementioned proliferation of documentation and classification of signing practices has fostered at least two threads of scientific discourse. One is sign language typology, which seeks to investigate the similarities and differences within different signing practices as well as between signed and spoken languages (de Vos & Pfau, 2015; Nyst, 2012; Zeshan & de Vos, 2012; Zeshan & Palfreyman, 2017, 2020). The other thread is an intellectual motivation to map a developmental trajectory from ‘gesture’ to ‘homesign’ to ‘sign language’ as a way of understanding language emergence, a research topic that has been recently trending in linguistics and related fields (Brentari & Coppola, 2013).

These two threads are not necessarily at odds with one another. Many scholars have proposed a typology of sign languages based on relatively discrete linguistic and sociolinguistic criteria in order to better understand the circumstances in which sign languages emerge, grow, and change. The typology is often based on implicit assumptions of some distinction between three major categories of gesture, homesign, and sign language (Brentari & Goldin-Meadow, 2017; Goldin-Meadow & Brentari, 2017; Le Guen et al., 2020). Those categories themselves are ideological about what constitutes language and not-language on a linear continuum, with gesture situated at one end, homesign in the middle, and sign language on the other end (Kusters & Sahasrabudhe, 2018). Such categorization raises questions about the many possible ramifications for legal recognition, or the absence of legal recognition of signing practices in different countries, especially if a signing practice is framed as limited or idiosyncratic (Meulder et al., 2019; Snoddon & De Meulder, 2020; Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2019).

The language and not-language categories also propose what kind of communities tend to be associated with those signing practices on the basis of sociolinguistic and linguistic criteria from an evolutionary angle (Green, 2014; Nyst, 2012). The sociolinguistic criteria often include the number of deaf and hearing signers, the size and location of the signing community, the nature of linguistic input, the time depth of the signing practice, and the context and domains in which the signing occurs. The linguistic criteria, by comparison, are far less defined, since different researchers focus on various aspects of the structure of the signing practices and utilize different methods for collecting and analyzing data. There have been some observations about how certain linguistic features, such as duality of patterning, classifier constructions, and verb agreement, may not be uniformly distributed among many signing practices (cf. de Vos & Pfau, 2015).

Many scholars adopt these categories of signing practices, viewing them as discrete and categorical, while other scholars view them as more gradient and continuous. Lina is a deaf Asian-American linguist who takes a mixed-methods (ethnographic and usage-based linguistics) approach to documenting and describing signing practices of different families in an indigenous Mesoamerican community in Mexico. Connie is a Dutch hearing linguist who spent over a year in the Kata Kolok signing community during multiple trips 2007–2016. During this time, she lived in the central village and
documented signing practices from various types of Kata Kolok signers, ranging from children who acquire Kata Kolok natively, to hearing non-fluent signers. Connie: From my perspective, it has been clear from the very start of our field that sign practices are situated in communities that vary along various sociodemographic parameters. This has sparked interest in how such factors may affect language structure, for example, the sustained used of sign language by hearing second language users. Choosing one term to classify these sign language over another has perhaps become a way of foregrounding one hypothesis over another. For example, the terms ‘young sign languages’ or ‘small sign languages’ to pinpoint time depth as a source of variation between sign language grammars. Lina: I see that these practices tend to be classified along a linear continuum, pushing scholars to situate certain practices in what Safar (2020) calls a ‘grey area’ because they do not correspond to prototypical sociolinguistic ecologies such as a ‘Deaf community’ or ‘a shared signing community.’ I do not question the basic idea that the structure of signing practices can exhibit variation because of the influence of certain demographic characteristics with a community of practice. What I question, and perhaps object to, is the use of such characteristics as criteria for classifying sign languages and signing communities and drawing broad generalizations. The criteria are reductionistic and at times can be harmful, especially when a signing practice is invalidated as a natural way of communication for the interactants involved, or when labeling one sign practice as not-language reaffirms misconceptions regarding sign languages on a broader scale. These dichotomies neglect to capture the elusive but more nuanced and complex elements of spontaneous language use, which includes translanguaging, that arises among signers and their interactants in daily life.

If we must revise our existing classifications of signing practices for more accurate generalizations, we must go beyond checking lists of sociolinguistic and linguistic criteria. This would not be accomplished with linguistic fieldwork alone, but rather necessitates an ethnographic approach that would reveal patterns and particularities of language use embedded in the social lives of deaf people and their interactants (see also Hodge and Goico, this issue). Connie: I see that the way to move forward is to gain a quantified perspective of what signing practices look like in everyday interactions, too. For example, by combining questionnaires targeting the everyday communicative experiences of deaf people in their sign ecologies with longitudinal fieldwork that includes focusing on daily patterns of interaction among specific individuals (cf. Nonaka, 2009). Such rich data and metadata are crucial especially in understanding the social interaction patterns that lead to linguistic complexity and variation. Lina: One cannot forget that sign languages and signing communities are adapting to an ever-changing world, thus whatever generalizations are made about them should be not treated as static, but rather snapshots of particular times and spaces. Ultimately, our goals are not just to classify signing practices and communities, but rather to capture the full range of visual-manual and tactile communication of deaf and deaf–blind signers and their interactants in their ecologies and describe the interactional practices that support the communication.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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