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978-0-521-63142-6 - The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction

Rachel Sutton-spence and Bencie Woll

Excerpt

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Chapter one

Linguistics and sign linguistics

Linguistics tries to find out the rules that explain what language users know, so that we can understand how language works.

People who know a language use it without thinking. They can use a language very well, and get it right nearly all of the time. But, if we ask them to tell us the rules of their language, they often find that they cannot because they have never had to think about it before. Most users of a language do not think in terms of ‘rules’ for their language and often do not stop to think about it. As sign linguists, we want to stop and think about language, most especially British Sign Language, so that we can find the rules that explain how the language works.

If we are to understand how BSL works, sign linguistics needs to ask questions like:

- Is BSL just a pantomime?
- Is sign language the same around the world?
- How do we ask a question in BSL?
- How do we say ‘no’ in BSL?
- What is the order of signs in BSL?
- Does BSL have adjectives and adverbs like English does?
- How do we show something happened a long time ago in BSL?
- Are there some handshapes that are not part of BSL?
- Can we sign with a straight face and give the full meaning?
- Do all signers sign in the same way in BSL, or are there differences?

A linguist looks at the language and tries to find out the answers to questions such as these.

One of the tasks for linguistics has always been to find out everything possible about a language and write it down, so that someone else could learn it. Linguists have written dictionaries of languages so that learners could learn

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the vocabulary of the language. In many cases they have made a written form for the language, if it did not have one (it may seem strange to users of English to think that a language may not have a written form, but many of the world's languages are only spoken and do not have a written form). The linguists have then tried to work out and write down as many of the grammatical rules of the language as possible. The main aim of this sort of work was to describe the language. Many linguists were also missionaries who wanted to learn different languages so that they could teach their religion to the people who used those languages. Other linguists worked for the governments of countries that had colonised the speakers of these new languages and needed to know the languages in order to rule the people.

Missionaries and other church workers in Britain may have been some of the first sign linguists. They hoped that their descriptions of sign languages would make it possible for hearing people to learn to communicate with deaf people so that deaf people could share in church life.

Linguistics was revolutionised in the 1960s by Noam Chomsky, an American linguist. He pointed out that to just describe languages was not very challenging or very helpful for understanding language as a whole. His view was that it was a bit like collecting stamps – all very pretty to look at, but it did not answer any deep questions about the way language worked. Chomsky wanted to ask bigger, more important questions like: 'Why do we use language?', 'How do we learn language?', 'How do all human languages work?'

Linguistics now has two main aims: it still tries to describe languages, but it is now also interested in asking why the languages are like this.

Some sign linguistics is very theoretical and uses theoretical ideas from mainstream linguistics. This is useful and important work, to help increase our understanding of human languages generally. However, that is not what this book is about. From the point of this book, we will be trying to describe the way that BSL works. Sometimes we will ask why it works like this, but really our first job is to be able to explain what happens in BSL.

A knowledge of the linguistics of BSL is important for many people. Learners of BSL need to know how it works, so that they can learn it better, and understand how to use the language more like a fluent signer. They can also use sign linguistics to compare the English language (which they know) with BSL (which they are learning). People who are working as sign language teachers need to understand how the language works if they are going to teach it well. When a student signs something wrong, the tutor needs to be able to explain why it is wrong, and how to sign it right. A sign tutor who is a fluent BSL signer still needs to be aware of the rules of BSL, in order to explain the language in a structured way to learners. Tutors could just teach people all the signs in the BSL dictionary, but that would not be the whole of BSL. All lan-

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guages are very much more than just vocabulary and tutors need to know how to explain this to students.

Linguistics is not easy. Even the best users of a language cannot always tell us the rules of their language. We can use an analogy here to think about the problems for fluent language users talking about their language. Many people can ride a bicycle, but very few people can explain how it is done. If we ask them, they may stop and think about it, and come up with some basic rules (e.g. you have to put your feet on the pedals and you have to keep going forwards, otherwise you fall off), but what is important is that they never normally think about it.

If a person knows BSL, they may be able to think for a while and be able to answer a question about it. For example, a linguist may ask ‘When do you use fingerspelling in BSL?’ or ‘Why do deaf people nod their heads a lot when they sign?’ They will probably have a few immediate answers, but as they think more about it, they will probably find that they have to add things or change their mind. Maybe they will have to watch themselves signing, or look at other people. Just because a person uses nods or fingerspelling, it does not mean that they can explain it easily to someone else.

Any person describing their language also must be careful, because if they have never thought about something before they could give the wrong answer. A person might tell a linguist that they never use one particular sign, when really they do, but think that they do not. For example, one British deaf signer said that she did not use the American sign OK, and only used the British sign OK (fig. 1.1). Ten minutes later, in conversation with the same people, she used the American sign. She was not lying when she said she never used the American sign. She really believed that she never used it.

Again, it may seem odd that someone who is fluent in a language is not aware of what they are doing. If we go back to the bicycle analogy we can see that it is not so strange. If we ask someone how to ride a bike, they might tell us that we need to steer by moving the handlebars. They really think that we do turn the handlebars when we ride a bike. In fact, we normally lean to steer and if we tried to turn the handlebars, we would probably fall off.

Fluent users of a language are very useful to linguists, but we cannot always expect them to get things right, especially when it comes to asking them for rules about their language. So, linguists need to study language for themselves. Linguists have to try to be detached and view a language as if they were nothing to do with it.

We can say that the job of a linguist is to find out how a language works, so we need to ask what it is that users of a language ‘know’. We can say that they will know the sounds or gestures that are allowed in the language, they will know the words or signs that are in the language (and what they mean) and they will know how to string the words or signs together to make larger units of meaning.

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Fig. 1.1a OK (BSL)



Fig. 1.1b OK (ASL)

WHAT DO WE KNOW WHEN WE ‘KNOW’ A LANGUAGE?

(1) **Someone who knows a language has knowledge of its forms (sounds, gestures, etc.).** This includes knowledge of what forms are in the language and what forms are not. People who know English immediately know if a word could be a word of English. People who know BSL immediately know if a sign could be a sign of BSL. In both cases, we know what is acceptable in the language and what is not.

If we use a word from another language that has forms that are *not* in our language, we have three main options. We can use a substitute from our lan-

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Fig. 1.2 EIGHT (Portuguese Sign Language)

guage, we can add that form to our language or we can mark it in some way as being 'foreign'.

Some handshapes appear very odd to British signers, such as the handshape for the Portuguese number EIGHT (fig. 1.2). At first, British signers may even wonder how people can get their fingers into such positions, but for Portuguese signers, it is no problem, because it is a part of their language.

In BSL there is no native sign handshape identical to the American manual letter 'e' (although it can be made if the shape of the referent requires that handshape). There is a sign EUROPE that uses this handshape (for example, in French Sign Language). Users of BSL who borrow this sign need to deal with a form outside their language. One solution is to change the handshape to fit BSL by relaxing the handshape into a looser O-shaped hand (see fig. 1.3). Signers usually do this without thinking about it. They may even be surprised that they do it. Another solution is to use the handshape but note in their minds, perhaps subconsciously, that it is foreign in some way.

BSL does not use certain parts of the body for making signs. There is a set signing space in BSL, and signs are normally not made outside this space. For example, there are no established signs that use the buttocks, or the back of the head, or the inside of the upper arm as a location. Some strongly visually motivated signs (see chapter 10) can be made outside the normal signing space (e.g. SMACK-ON-BACK-OF-HEAD or BEE-STING-INNER-UPPER-ARM) but these are exceptional. The BSL sign ASDA is derived from the supermarket chain's logo of patting the rear trouser pocket. BSL does not have established signs on the buttocks, so many signers relocate the sign to the side of the hip.

BSL has handshapes in its signs that other languages do not. Greek signers do not use a handshape with the fist closed and only the little finger and ring

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Fig. 1.3a EUROPE (French Sign Language)

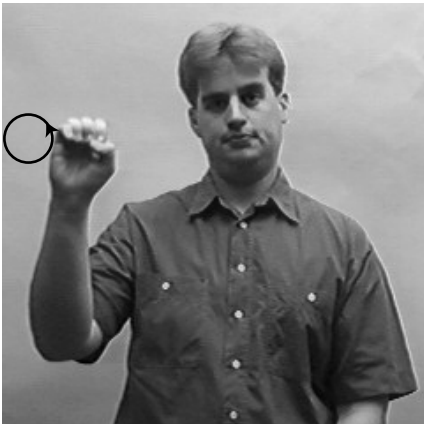


Fig. 1.3b EUROPE (BSL)

finger extended. In BSL this is used for the numeral SEVEN in some dialects, and found in signs such as NEXT-WEEK (fig. 1.4). American Sign Language (ASL) does not have the handshape with the fist closed and only the middle finger extended. BSL uses this in HOLIDAY and MOCK (fig. 1.5). Any ASL signer would know automatically that this handshape is not a part of ASL. If we asked them to make a list of every handshape in ASL, they would probably not be able to, but if they saw the BSL sign MOCK, they could easily say that ASL did not use that handshape.

These differences between languages can be seen in spoken languages as well. Standard British English does not use the sound made in the back of the



Fig. 1.4 NEXT-WEEK



Fig. 1.5 MOCK

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Fig. 1.6 IT (Irish Sign Language)

throat, that is found in Scottish words like *loch* and German words like *Bach*. English speakers often change the sound to a /k/, so that *loch* and *Bach* are pronounced like *lock* and *bark*. Alternatively, they may keep the 'foreign' sound for any words that they know use it in the original language but they certainly would not make a new English word using it.

A user of the language knows what could be a part of their language, and what could never be found in it. For example, the word *mbwa* (the Swahili word meaning 'dog') could never be part of English, but *wamb* could be, if someone invented it. The first word has a sound combination that cannot occur in English. The second word contains a combination that is seen in English.

A BSL user also knows what could be in the language, and what could never be found in it. For example, we would have to reject a sign made on the back of the knee as a possible sign of BSL. The Irish Sign Language sign IT uses a handshape foreign to BSL, so that sign is not part of BSL (fig. 1.6). However, there is no reason why BSL could not have a sign that uses the little finger extended from the fist, circling in contact with the cheek. It just happens that no such sign exists – at least, not at present – although it would be allowed by the rules of BSL.

It is worth noting that speakers of different languages often cannot even hear different sounds from other languages and very often cannot make these sounds accurately. Signers usually can use the locations or make the handshapes from other sign languages, perhaps because sign elements can be easily seen, while the articulators for spoken language are largely invisible. It is even possible to mould a signer's hand into the right configuration if they have problems forming it (although this is not good manners if the signer is an adult). The fact that sign languages still reject certain forms as being foreign, even if they are not difficult to make, shows that the sign languages are working in a similar way to spoken languages.

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(2) **Someone who knows a language also knows the sign/words in the language and how to relate these forms to meanings.** This means that they know the lexicon (the mental vocabulary) of the language, and they know what signs or words mean. This is probably what most people mean when they say they ‘know’ a language.

The relationship between forms and meanings is ‘conventional’. This means that everyone who uses a language has agreed that a particular sound or gesture has a certain meaning. Here we need to understand the term ‘referent’. A referent is something referred to by a sign or a word. If we see a mouse, we use the word *mouse* to describe it. The real animal we are talking about is the referent, and the word *mouse* or the sign MOUSE is the symbol that refers to it. We can say that the symbol MOUSE has a conventional relationship with the referent ‘mouse’. *Mouse*, *souris*, and *rato* have been agreed by speakers of different spoken languages to refer to a small furry creature that lives in a hole and eats cheese. So there is a different convention in each language. If speakers did not agree, someone could use another word such as *dog* to refer to a ‘mouse’ and it would be very confusing.

In sign languages this is also true, even for signs that seem very visually motivated. Users of a sign language must all agree on a symbol for a referent. The BSL and ASL signs for the referent ‘pig’ are both clearly visually motivated, but very different in form: the BSL sign focuses on the shape of a pig’s snout, and the ASL sign focuses on a pig eating from a trough. The BSL sign UNIVERSITY is visually motivated and focuses on the shape of a mortar-board, while the equally visually motivated Spanish Sign Language sign focuses on the idea of students carrying books under their arm (fig. 1.7). Two similar signs in ASL and BSL represent a beard but in ASL this means ‘old’ and in BSL it means ‘man’. These examples show that signs must be agreed conventionally by the language users, even when they are visually motivated.

There are many different signs for MOUSE, even within BSL, but users are agreed that their sign means the same small furry animal that lives in a hole and eats cheese. This means that the signers know the lexicon, and know what the lexicon means. If we know a language, we are able to name a mouse when we see it. We do not know a language fully if we know that one sign is formed as ‘bent index finger at the side of the nose’ but we do not know that it means MOUSE, and refers to the small furry animal. We will discuss this topic in more detail in chapter 9.

(3) **Someone who knows a language, knows how to combine words/signs to form phrases and how to combine phrases to form sentences.** It means having knowledge of the syntax of the language. It gives the user of the language the opportunity to be creative.

Dictionaries contain many words, and a good dictionary may be expected to contain most of the ‘words’ in a language. However, there are no diction-



Fig. 1.7a UNIVERSITY (BSL)



Fig. 1.7b UNIVERSITY (Spanish Sign Language)

aries to tell us the sentences allowed in a language. This would be impossible because there are an infinite number of sentences that can be made in any language. This is not a problem for a person who ‘knows’ a language because if we know the rules of the language, we can understand and produce new sentences. We may not know how we do it, but we can do it.

This is why it is not enough to teach someone BSL by teaching them every sign in the dictionary. Even after learning the entire lexicon, a person still would not know how to put the signs together to make a sentence.

In BSL, users also know how to add grammatical information to signs. Signers can also take parts of signs and put them together to make new signs. This is unlike English, where words are mostly fixed and a speaker does not often create a new word. We will discuss this in more detail in chapter 11.

IS BSL A FULL, REAL HUMAN LANGUAGE?

All too often, people (including some linguists) have dismissed sign languages as not being ‘real’ languages. The popular view of sign languages is that they are merely some sort of limited pantomime or gesture system, and very much inferior to spoken languages. Here we will consider the possibility that BSL may not be a real language. We will reject this idea, and show that it is – in every way – a full human language.

One of the most important results of sign linguistics studies over the last 30 years has been to demonstrate to everyone (who cares to look) that BSL is a language just as good as English, or any other language.

This is important because some powerful people have thought that BSL is not a language at all, so it has not been used in many settings, including schools, churches, or on television, and deaf people have suffered by having their language ignored or insulted. The Abbé de l’Épée, the great French edu-

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cator of deaf children in the late eighteenth century, believed that deaf people should use signs, but even he believed that the ‘natural gestures’ of deaf people needed changing to follow the grammar of French. Many deaf people have been told by English speakers that deaf signing is not as good as English, and they have come to believe this. Because of this prevailing attitude, it is worth making two points very clear:

- **BSL has got a grammar, just as good as English.** Its rules are very different, and in some ways they are more flexible, but it still has got a grammar. BSL sign order is different from English word order, but it still has its own rules of sign order.
- **BSL has got a lexicon, just as good as English.** The lexicon is not as big, but the size of the lexicon is not as important as being able to say anything necessary. It sometimes happens that there is not a single BSL sign to express something for which English uses a single word or phrase, but there are also some BSL signs for which there is no easy translation into English. Many languages lack exact translations for words in other languages. A well-known example is that English does not have a single word for the German word *Schadenfreude* (the pleasure derived from another person’s discomfort), and yet English can still express this meaning if necessary. If BSL really needs a specific item for a concept, it can create new signs just as English can make new words. BSL can also borrow new signs from other languages, just as English can borrow new words.

A linguist named Charles Hockett suggested in the 1960s that there were several ‘essential characteristics’ of all human languages which are not found in other communication systems. This approach to defining language is very different from traditional dictionary definitions. It can also help us to see what characteristics are common to both spoken and signed languages. We will consider some of these characteristics here.

Language has broadcast transmission and directional reception

Human language is ‘broadcast’. That is, it is not beamed to an individual receiver, but can be received by anyone within hearing (for spoken languages) or sight (for sign languages). Anyone within range can receive what is being communicated and identify the person communicating.

Rapid fading

Both speech and sign have rapidly fading signals. The channels remain open for use and re-use. Language users need complex memory abilities to process and store the short-lived signals of language.