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Hand Talk

Sign Language among American Indian Nations

American Indian nations of the Great Plains and cultural groups bordering this geographic area spoke so many different languages that verbal communication between them was difficult. As extensive trade networks developed and political alliances became necessary, an elegant language of the hands developed that cut across spoken language barriers. Though now endangered, this sign language continues to serve a vital role in traditional storytelling, rituals, legends, prayers, conversational narratives, and as a primary language of American Indians who are deaf. This volume contains the most current descriptions of all levels of the language from phonology to discourse, as well as comparisons with other sign languages. A website accompanying the book contains rare photographs, illustrations, and films – offering readers the opportunity to view the sign language being described. This is the first work of its kind to be produced in more than a century, and is intended for students of sign language as well as those wishing to learn more about American Indian languages and cultures.

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Running Bear (Arikara) showing the sign for NOW, c. 1880. By permission of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

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Jeffrey E. Davis
University of Tennessee



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Dedicated to Timothy, Beverly, and Paul
In loving memory of Hollis, Douglas, and Alvin Davis

To the outside world we all grow old. But not to brothers and sisters. We know each other as we always were. We know each other's hearts. We share private family jokes. We remember family feuds and secrets, family griefs and joys. We live outside the touch of time. — Clara Ortega

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Preface

Deaf people's strong inclination to develop and acquire sign language can be traced through history and is evident worldwide. Though the use of sign language is generally associated with individuals who are deaf, historically and contemporarily several types of indigenous sign language communities have emerged globally. In addition to being primary languages in Deaf communities, signed languages have developed in some hearing indigenous communities *as an alternative to spoken languages*. This book follows anthropological and historical linguistic approaches to the study of indigenous sign language used and transmitted from one generation to the next – particularly among North American Indians.

In writing this book, I have aimed to do justice to topics as vast and complex as language and culture – more so considering the endangered status of the signed and spoken languages of native North America. In some ways, this has been analogous to Diaspora or Holocaust studies. *Hand Talk*¹ is a story about the central role of sign language in the lives of many different individuals and communities, and about the resilience of language and culture. Throughout this book, I have referred readers to several important sources that have served as beacons to guide me through these studies. These works contain a cornucopia of information about the earliest inhabitants and First Nations of North America, and about the status of native languages and cultures today.

Although Native American sign language has dramatically waned from its formerly widespread use across the Great Plains cultural areas, there remains a rich legacy of rare documentary materials. Though some volumes have been written about the subject of Indian sign language, the language itself has been generally overlooked or understudied in the field of sign language linguistics that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Understandably, most sign language researchers have focused their studies predominately on the signing of Deaf communities. However, the legacy of documentary materials that form the language corpus of this book enables us to revisit some long-standing questions about historical sign language contact in North America, and to better understand the nature and structure of indigenous signed language in the

frameworks of today's scholarly disciplines, e.g., anthropology, history, and linguistics.

Significance of North American Indian sign language studies

The central focus of this book is the signing used by North American Indians, which has been observed and documented since sixteenth-century European contact. There is strong reason to believe that signing existed before contact with Europeans. Two recurring themes in the early writings about sign languages have to do with “universality” and “iconicity” – theoretical issues that linguists find necessary to address even today. The study of sign languages helps broaden our understanding of numerous linguistic issues and illuminates other questions about the nature, structure, and origins of human language. It is noteworthy that the early anthropological linguistic research on American Indian signed languages informed the seminal work of some of the first signed language linguists (e.g., Stokoe 1960; Battison 1978) and of the disciplines of semiotics (Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok 1978).

For many years, in the field of sign language studies, it has been widely accepted that American Sign Language (ASL) developed in part from the sign language used by deaf members of the seventeenth-century American communities, e.g., Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (Groce 1985). It's also believed that ASL borrowed heavily from European sign languages, e.g., Old Kent Sign Language and French Sign Language. The former could have been brought by some early British signing immigrants, and the latter was imported for the purpose of educating American deaf children beginning in the early 1800s (Lane 1984). While these cases of early language contact are often mentioned in the literature, they are based on a dearth of linguistic evidence. In contrast, the historical contact between early European-American signing communities and American Indian signing communities is sometimes mentioned, but little described in the sign language literature of recent times. When it is written about, it's typically glossed over, footnoted or dismissed altogether as not being relevant to our studies of the sign languages of Deaf communities. Hopefully, the historical and contemporary studies presented in this book will further illuminate the history, mystery, and contemporary use of America's native languages – both signed and spoken.

How the work of this book began

My odyssey to discover the linguistic origin, nature, and structure of the sign language used by American Indian groups began nearly two decades ago. From June, 1990, to May, 1992, my colleague Sam Supalla and I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork and documented the native sign language used

in a Navajo (Diné) community with several deaf family members (six out of eleven siblings were deaf or hard of hearing). Working with Navajo collaborators, we documented and described the highly elaborate family-based sign system used by this particular Navajo family. We found that it was distinct from ASL and that the members of this Navajo clan (with several deaf family members) signed more fluently than members of the larger hearing Navajo community, who used signed communication on certain occasions (see Davis and Supalla 1995). We were astonished that this particular Navajo community was reminiscent of the historical case of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language – a sign language that emerged and was used by both deaf and hearing community members on the island; also comparable to today's well-studied case of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL). More descriptions of these signing communities are given in chapter 9.

In my ongoing quest to gather as much original source material about this subject as possible, I discovered that the richest sources of historical linguistic and ethnographic documentation come from archival sources. The first of these sources was the extensive fieldwork conducted by late nineteenth-century anthropologists and ethnologists who worked with the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution, and the second was the motion pictures of Plains and Basin Indians signing produced with support from a 1930 Act of the US Congress.²

Since then, with the support of other small research grants, I have returned to the Smithsonian Institution numerous times to study the historical documentary materials about this subject. I believe that these materials (see chapters 3 and 5 and website that complements the book) represent an unparalleled resource for historical sign language research, which can now be reexamined in light of current linguistic theories, interdisciplinary perspectives, and comparative studies of sign language among deaf and hearing North American Indians and other indigenous peoples around the world (chapter 9).

My research on this subject began in the early 1990s as a part of my postdoctoral studies at the University of Arizona. Davis and Supalla (1995) conducted fieldwork, which focused first on one Navajo signing community. We compared and described the similarities and differences between deaf and hearing Navajo signers from the same clan. Preliminarily, we found that the Navajo family sign system was distinct from the standard sign language variety of the Great Plains cultural area (chapter 7). Depending on topic, setting, and participants, we also observed that signing was used to varying degrees of proficiency – ranging from signing with or without speech, to signing that functions similarly to a primary sign language (chapter 9).

Subsequently, Melanie McKay-Cody (1997) focused her research on the *Plains Indian Sign Language* (PISL) that was extraordinarily well documented in the 1930s films that I obtained copies of from the Smithsonian (see

note 2). McKay-Cody compared a traditional narrative about buffalo hunting signed by Mountain Chief (Blackfoot) with a similar narrative about buffalo hunting signed by James Woodenlegs (who continues to be one of our main deaf native collaborators), who had learned the traditional Plains sign language variety as a young child growing up on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The chief consultant's hearing family members still signed the Plains variety and his Cheyenne ancestors were among the main historical progenitors of traditional Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL).

Based on extensive linguistic analysis, McKay-Cody (1997) found that more than two-thirds of the signs used by the primary native deaf Cheyenne signer were identical or similar (i.e., different in only one parameter, or signed with one hand instead of two) to the signs produced by Mountain Chief in the historical documentary films (chapter 5). Melanie described how the alternate sign language used by hearing Indians became linguistically enriched when learned as a primary language by members of Indian communities who are deaf. Her research also clearly showed that the narrative structures and morphological complexities of historical and contemporary PISL are comparable with those found in ASL (see further descriptions in chapters 1, 5, 7, and 9). In the course of my writing this book, Melanie McKay-Cody and I have resumed our collaboration to conduct further fieldwork to document and describe the remaining native signers of PISL, now considered an endangered language (Davis 2005a, Gordon 2005).

Little could I have imagined that nearly two decades after my postdoctoral work with the Navajo in Arizona I would still be studying the signed languages and cultures of American Indians, and feeling that I've barely described the tip of the iceberg regarding these vast subjects.

Aims of the book

To the best of my knowledge, this book is the first of its kind published in more than one hundred years. That is, it contains anthropological *and* linguistic research findings from *both* historical and contemporary studies of North American Indian Sign Language. Moreover, the website that complements the book features an extensive corpus of sign language descriptions from written, illustrated, and filmed sources, and allows readers to see much of the data being described here. One of my chief aims has been to point others to this extraordinary language corpus so that this endangered sign language variety can be further documented, described, *and revitalized*. Crystal (2000) has written that language documentation and description for the purpose of revitalization are enormous undertakings. And this work is rendered urgent by the present endangered status of most indigenous languages. These linguistic studies and activities help broaden our understanding of the cognitive and social bases of

human language and raise historical-linguistic and sociolinguistic questions about language origins, spread, attitude, contact, and change.

Plan of the book

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the geographic locations, and historical, linguistic and cultural contexts in which signed language was used among American Indian groups. North America was once an area of extreme linguistic and cultural diversity, with hundreds of distinct and mutually unintelligible languages spoken by the native populations. Historically, a conventionalized and linguistically enriched signed language emerged as a means of communication between various American Indian language groups – a *signed lingua franca* of sorts. The endangered status of these languages is discussed.

We also find that naming practices and preferences vary from one individual and community to the next. “Native American” or “First Nations” are generally considered politically correct terms; however, members of these groups commonly refer to themselves as Indian or American Indian. As an interpreter and ethnographer, I have aimed to be a keen listener and observer, and to remain receptive and flexible. The names of North American Indian groups and nations, and the linguistic terminology used to describe these multilingual and multicultural communities are presented here.

The remainder of the book is arranged chronologically – beginning with the earliest known written historical accounts of Indians signing and leading to what we know, and do not know, about indigenous signed languages around the world today. Chapter 2 describes the earliest known written historical accounts of Indians signing, beginning with those made by Spanish explorers during the 1500s. Descriptions and illustrations of Indian signs were also compiled by members of the first official expeditions, during the early 1800s, to the western territories of what is now the United States.

Although commonly reported by colonizers and explorers, research about the sign language of American Indians would not begin in earnest until more than three hundred years after initial European contact. Recognizing that indigenous languages were rapidly vanishing, formal research was conducted by the original ethnologists to do fieldwork among North American Indian groups for the Smithsonian’s Bureau of Ethnology (now the National Anthropology Archives) within the National Museum of Natural History. This is recognized as the world’s greatest archival resource for the study of American Indian languages and cultures. In chapter 3, I chronicle the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the first formal ethnographic, anthropological, and linguistic studies of North American Indian Sign Language that were carried out at the Smithsonian. The documentation and description of sign language was conducted and coordinated from 1879 until 1894 by Garrick Mallery with

assistance from numerous American Indian collaborators and some of the first ethnologists at the Smithsonian, such as Franz Boas, Frank Cushing, Walter Hoffman, and James Mooney. As a result of these prodigious efforts, there remains a rich linguistic and ethnographic legacy in the form of diaries, books, articles, illustrations, dictionaries, and motion pictures documenting the varieties of signed language historically used among native populations of North America (featured on the website that complements the book). The major linguistic and theoretical contributions of Mallery and his collaborators to our study of North American Indian Sign Language today are highlighted in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, I examine the historical documentary films produced as an outcome of a 1930 Act of the US Congress. In the films we see Indian chiefs and tribal delegates engaged in signed language discourse – ranging from ceremonial to conversational – in the largest such gathering ever filmed. Based on years of analyzing the contents of these films, I describe how sign language was used for more purposes than trading, negotiating, hunting, war-making, or peace-keeping. Evidently, sign language emerged as part of the rich oral storytelling tradition of numerous American Indian groups and was also used within tribes for a variety of discourse purposes, for example, storytelling, conversing, making jokes, and chanting.

Some of the main progenitors of twentieth-century anthropology and linguistics documented and described the conventionalized sign language of American Indians – most notably Boas (1890/1978), Kroeber (1958), and Voegelin (1958).³ Mentored by Kroeber and Voegelin, West (1960) conducted extensive fieldwork that produced film documentation and linguistic analyses. West filmed signed language narratives covering a wide range of discourse topics from over one hundred American Indian participants from the Great Plains area who were proficient sign language users. Subsequently, Farnell (1995) focused on the sign language storytelling of two Assiniboiné elders at Fort Belknap Reservation, Montana. Although not as widespread as in previous times, Farnell reported that fluent signers still lived on various northern Plains reservations (e.g., Assiniboiné, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, and Blackfeet). These previous anthropological and linguistic studies are reviewed in chapter 6.

Several dialects or varieties of indigenous sign language have been identified among North American Indian groups. Sociolinguistic factors and outcomes – such as language contact, variation, change, and spread – based on my recent fieldwork and research, are described in chapter 7. New linguistic descriptions of PISL, based on current language theories and research approaches, have been long overdue. Based on the PISL corpus described in this volume, I have conducted new linguistic analyses, and these descriptions are presented in chapter 8.

Finally, in chapter 9, I consider other cases of sign language among indigenous communities around the world – especially when it is used within a linguistic community for a variety of discourse purposes, and when it has existed for more than one generation. In addition to its occurrence across North America, signed communication has been observed among some indigenous groups in other geographic locations, such as parts of Asia, Australia, and South America. Such cases have also been documented and described within predominately hearing communities, although with a high incidence of genetic deafness, such as the famous historical case of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, or present-day occurrences, such as Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (Aronoff, Meir, Sandler, and Padden 2005; Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006). The theoretical implications for these global occurrences of nativized signed languages are considered in chapter 9, along with summaries of the major findings of the book.

Website

Readers may view film clips, illustrations, and photographs documenting North American Indian Sign Language at the following website developed and maintained by the author of this book: www.handtalkbook.com.

The rare historical linguistic documentary materials featured in this website were digitized and organized according to best practices published by Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Data (E-MELD). To ensure the interoperability and long-term stability of the digital language corpus of North American Indian Sign Language, we followed the standards of the General Ontology for Language Descriptions (GOLD). The digital archive and website were developed with support of a 2006–7 research fellowship awarded to the author for Documenting Endangered Languages (FN-50002), from the National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities, in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution. A new NSF grant (BCS-0853665) helps maintain the website. I also received additional support to conduct archival research and fieldwork, and to develop the website, from the University of Tennessee's Office of the Chancellor, Innovative Technology Center, and SunSITE.

It is hoped that the language corpus featured in this book and website will encourage other scholars to examine the specific linguistic structures of PISL and the historical and cultural information contained in these materials.

Glossary of key terms

This book is written with multiple audiences and disciplines in mind, covers a broad range of subjects and languages, and contains historical source material

xxii Preface

in which the historical argot sometimes varies from current use. In addition to the naming practices and preferences of indigenous groups, the terminology used to describe multilingual and multicultural communities can be complicated – perhaps more so at the nexus of spoken and signed languages. A glossary is included to help guide readers through the use of specialized terminology (i.e., anthropological, cultural, and linguistic) that are specific to these studies.

Acknowledgements

Most of the work of this book was carried out from 2004 to 2009. However, my research on the subject of sign language among American Indian groups began in 1990, during my postdoctoral studies at the University of Arizona. Prior to that time, I had been a graduate student and then a faculty member in the Department of Linguistics and Interpretation at Gallaudet University and Consortium of Universities in Washington, DC. There, I had the good fortune to work and study with some notable scholars and mentors, such as Carol Erting, Robert Johnson, Harlan Lane, Scott Liddell, Ceil Lucas, William Stokoe, Deborah Tannen, Clayton Valli, Walt Wolfram, and James Woodward. Leaving those environs was no easy decision and the major impetus was the opportunity to study sign language among the Navajo (Diné) in Arizona and New Mexico.

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No doubt hearth and family are two of our greatest human treasures. While we know of nature's wrath, and bear witness to the causes and conditions of impermanence and endangerment, at the same time we can see the value of reconstruction and revitalization – be that a precious historical location or a language.

My research and work (since 1990 and continuing today) at the Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and National Archives would not have been possible without the generosity of my brother, Paul, who hosted me at his Washington, DC, home during numerous research visits to the vast collections of the Smithsonian. Coincidentally, the scientists and scholars central to this book – Bell, Gallaudet, Mallery, Scott, Powell, and others – were long-time residents of Washington, DC, and major contributors to the establishment of these institutions and learned societies that continue up until today. I was privileged to have worked, studied, and written in some of the same spaces as they had, and benefited immensely from the legacy of scholarship that they produced.

I continue to be astonished at the array of historical documentary materials and the work of earlier scholars – most notably Mallery, Scott, and West – who dedicated many years to the intensive study of the North American Indian language of signs. I have found myself consumed by a similar enthusiasm for the subject. Now, I better understand how these scholars devoted their life's work to studying the signed and spoken languages of American Indians. I am indebted to those who came before, especially the American Indians who generously shared their cultural heritage and sign language narratives with us. This book is the result of the work and dedication of many other individuals. I intend to donate half of the royalties I may receive from this book to the continuation of language documentation and revitalization work, and to support the involvement of members of native communities through education and collaboration.

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Some parts of this book draw on material that first appeared elsewhere (although the material has been considerably reworked): chapters 2 and 5 draw on “A historical linguistic account of sign language among North American Indians” (Davis 2006a) and chapter 7 draws on “North American Indian signed language varieties: a comparative linguistic assessment” (Davis 2007). These

two works appeared in vols. 12 and 13 of the Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities series published by Gallaudet University Press.

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"I have seen that in any great undertaking it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself." – Lone Man (Isna-la-wica), Teton Sioux

Tribal delegates at the Indian Sign Language Council, 1930

The following are pictured in the illustrations. The initials in brackets are used for proper names in the sample transcriptions.

Dick Washakie, Shoshone [DW]
Short Face, Piegan [SF]
Bitter Root Jim, Flathead [BR]
Night Shoots, Piegan [NS]
Drags Wolf, Hidatsa [DR]
Iron Whip, Sioux [IW]
Deer Nose, Crow [DN]
James Eagle, Arikara [JE]
Foolish Woman, Mandan [FW]
Strange Owl, Cheyenne [SO]
Bird Rattler, Blood [BI]
Mountain Chief, Piegan Chief [MC]
Assiniboine Boy, Upper Gros Ventre [AB]
Tom White Horse, Arapaho [TW]
Rides Black Horse, Assiniboine [RBH]
Little Plume, Piegan [LP]
Fine Young Man, Sarcee [FY]
Joe Big Plume, Sarcee [BP]
Richard Sanderville, Blackfoot [RS]

Notational conventions

Glosses and abbreviations	Explanations
INDIAN	Signs are glossed as English words using SMALL CAPS
WHITE-MAN	Hyphenated gloss indicates <i>one sign</i>
WHITE-MAN^CHIEF	Compound signs are joined with a caret symbol (^)
“US President”	Translations are quoted in text below glossed transcriptions
FRIEND+	Sign reduplicated
FAR = DISTANT	Same sign form and similar meaning, glossed two ways in original source material (i.e. synonyms)
ALL-OF-YOU NOW HERE	Marked signer pause at the end of an utterance ()
QUIET-DOWN {stop fighting}	{original translation} accompanying a sign gloss to clarify its intended meaning
COUNCIL-1 or 2	Sign synonyms (same meaning, different lexical forms) are numbered and described separately in the text and annotations
PRO.1-a, PRO.2, PRO.3	First-, second-, third-person singular pronouns; a, b, c indicates different forms as described in text analyses
PRO.1.PL	-PL indicates a plural pronoun form
IX	Indicates a general class of deictic signs, such as determiners, pronouns, and predicate locatives. Also called “pointing signs” (discussed in text).
IX ^[YOU]	Pointing sign [pronominal referent indicated]
IX ^[Shoshone]	Pointing sign [place name or person referenced]
YES ^[EMP]	Morphosyntactic information bracketed
Q-FORM	Wh-question form (Who, Where, How)
X-FORM	Unknown lexical form
RECIP	Reciprocal verb form
LOC	Predicate locative
DM	Discourse marker
EMP	Emphatic marker
CL	Classifier predicates or depicting signs described in text analyses

About glosses

Glosses are one-word capitalized forms used to represent a sign and to show the arrangement of lexical items in a language. In this volume (and as indicated in the table above), glosses of PISL and ASL signs are typed in uppercase English (SMALL CAPS); and numbered to refer back to examples in the PISL corpus (1) (2) (3) (p. 21, line 3), etc.

In sign language linguistics, it is common practice for any given sign to have a gloss, which is essentially a name for the sign based either on its meaning or on its phonetic make-up. Glosses are written in capital letters, and should not be taken as good translations. It would be easy to think, based on an utterance written as a gloss, that signed languages are simple or grammatically broken, but any language glossed into any other language will tend to have this appearance, as shown in this table.

Mandarin Chinese	Simplified	你妈妈爸爸是做什么的？
	Pinyin	Nǐ māma bàba shì zuò shénme de?
	IPA	[ni˥˥ ma˥˥ mə˥˥ pa˥˥ ʃə˥˥ ʃə˥˥ tɕʰə˥˥ tsuo˥˥ ʃə˥˥ mə˥˥ tə˥˥]
Gloss		PRO.2.SGL MOTHER FATHER BE DO WHAT POSS
English		What do your mother and father do?

Simply put, glosses are a tool used for linguistic analyses, and it must be emphasized that glosses are *not the same as a translation or a definition*. Although a useful means for linguists to indicate and classify lexical items, glosses can also be easily misrepresented or misinterpreted. That is, unlike translations, glosses do not generally convey the rich meaning or cultural nuances of the source language texts, as they were originally intended and expressed. This indicates the importance of ongoing collaboration and cross-verification with native consultants and fellow linguistic researchers.

Pointing signs

- Pointing signs are distinguished with the following glosses:
- IX [specific referent bracketed]
 - IX-rgt, lft, ctr, arc (when salient)
 - IX (additional lexical information in superscript – such as left to right ^{L1→L2})
- Pronouns are glossed in the following manner (see chapter 8):
- PRO→x |Shoshone|
 - PRO.1 (form a, b, c)
 - PRO.2 (you)
 - PRO.3-index