Diversity and Community in the Worldwide Sign Language Interpreting Profession

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Lexical Variation and Interpreting in New Zealand Sign Language

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New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), like many other signed languages, has much variation in its vocabulary, which potentially presents challenges for interpreting. This paper firstly describes some examples of research findings on lexical variation in NZSL, and secondly reports on a small investigation of how interpreters and Deaf consumers in New Zealand regard lexical variation as an issue for interpreting.

Sociolinguistic variation

In all languages it is normal to find variation in the way that people talk: groups within a language community differ in some of the words and grammatical constructions they prefer, in their pronunciation of certain sounds, and in their sense of how to communicate appropri-
ately. Sociolinguistic research has shown that speakers' language choices are neither random nor individual; rather, they are related to characteristics such as social class, region, age, gender, ethnicity and social network. People also vary their language use according to the setting or situation they are in, and the identity they want to project.

When different ways of talking are systematically linked to social factors about people or situations, this is described as sociolinguistic variation. Studying this variation often gives clues about the process of historical change within a language. Variation and change may arise from internal (spontaneous) innovations and external influences through contact with speakers from other language communities. Research on sociolinguistic variation can be useful in challenging popular beliefs about right and wrong, or better and worse ways of talking; sociolinguists would say that there is no such thing as a 'standard' or 'correct' form of any language, but that variation is a natural feature of all languages which reveals interesting information about how people identify themselves socially.

Many signed languages have existed 'underground' for long periods; this status has disrupted and affected transmission between generations, and also limited the potentially standardising effects of using sign languages in education and mass media. Deaf individuals acquire sign language at various ages, and through history, different generations experienced changing attitudes towards, and access to, sign language in school and in society. These social conditions surrounding the use of signed languages contribute to the individual and group variation that is often seen within signing communities.

Variation is relevant to sign language interpreters for several reasons: most interpreters are non-native signers (of hearing families) and thus have to learn a wide repertoire of lexicon and styles used by the Deaf community. Unlike Deaf people who can choose to socialise mainly within familiar networks – i.e. people who probably share social background and language style – interpreters must communicate with the whole range of Deaf individuals of diverse ages, signing backgrounds, education levels, and other identity characteristics that affect communication. When delivering a target language message, interpreters select between potential vocabulary and stylistic alternatives, ideally with awareness of the match between their choices and audience preferences.

It is important for interpreters to be aware that simple lexical choices may convey social signals about attitude, knowledge or identity – for example, knowing which of the alternate signs for 'Chinese', or 'ruga', or 'lesbian' is favoured by a particular social group, or how much fingerspelling or mouthing would create a 'clear' message for particular consumers. Having the flexibility and awareness to match the preferred signs and style of older versus younger signers, or accommodate regional difference, may enable the interpreter to achieve audience comfort in an interpreted situation. Finally, interpreters are on the frontline of situations where new concepts from the dominant language enter signed language discourse (e.g. in professional and academic settings), and so they tend to encounter and pass on a variety of newly coined terms that are not yet stable in the language. Since interpreters are potential agents of language change and influence in their selection and transmission of signs (see Gras 1994), the conscious or unwitting choices made by interpreters may attract consumer approval or disapproval.

**NZSL and the New Zealand Deaf community**

NZSL is historically part of the British Sign Language family, and is closely related to Auslan and BSL (Johnston 2000; McKee and Kennedy 2000). Signers of these languages generally understand each other, although there are significant differences in lexicon and other features such as the use of fingerspelling and mouthing. NZSL is a young language in a small community; it was not used in the public domain prior to the mid 1980s.

The NZ Deaf community is estimated to be between 4,500 and 7,700 (Dugdale, 2000; Statistics New Zealand, 2001), in a national popula-
tion of four million. The two largest NZSL communities are in major
cities in the North and South islands which traditionally hosted the
two main residential deaf schools, opened in 1880 and 1942. Until
1979, deaf education was strictly oralist; signing was stigmatised
in schools, where it thrive nevertheless in the playground and dormito-
ries. Deaf schools co-enrolled girls and boys, and Maori (indigenous
New Zealanders) and Pakeha (white) children. In 1979, Australasian
Signed English was introduced, a sign system consisting mainly of
vocabulary from Auslan. Auslan vocabulary was adopted because it
was believed at the time that there was no systematic sign language in
use by the NZ Deaf community, due to an oralist school tradition.
This assumption was shown to be incorrect when linguistic description
of NZSL only began in the mid 1980s (Collins-Ahlgren, 1989), leading
to publication of a large dictionary of NZSL in 1997 (Kennedy et al,
1997).

The status of NZSL has risen greatly since then: it is now more
visible in education, community language classes, research, and the
granting of official status by law in 2006. Professional interpreters
were first trained in 1985, and have been regularly trained in a two-year
full-time course since 1992.

The Sociolinguistic Variation in NZSL Project

Sociolinguistic variation has been studied intensively in spoken
languages since the 1960s (for example Labov 1966; Shuy 1973), but
only recently in signed languages. Several small-scale studies have
reported interesting features of variation found in lexicon (signs),
phonology (articulation) and syntax (grammar) of signed languages in
various countries (such as Hoopes 1998; Leeson and Gahan 2004; Le
Master and Dwyer 1991; Woodward 1973; Vanhecke and De Weerdt
2004). Patterns of linguistic variation are linked to social categories
(for example men vs. women) rather than individual speakers. It is
therefore important to confirm patterns of variation by analysing a
large amount of data from many signers in various social categories in
order to draw reliable conclusions about links between social identity
factors and language preferences.

The Deaf Studies Research Unit at Victoria University of Wellington
is currently undertaking a three-year project on Sociolinguistic
Variation in NZSL. This project is using quantitative methods to
measure how age, region, gender and ethnicity correlate with selected
linguistic features in the lexicon, phonology and syntax of NZSL.
The research methodology is modelled closely on two previous large-
scale studies of sociolinguistic variation in ASL (Lucas, Bayley and
Valli 2001) and in Auslan (Schembri and Johnston 2004). We hope
these three similar studies will allow cross-linguistic comparison to
discover whether similar factors and processes affect variation across
signed languages. Deaf communities have particular social and
historical characteristics that may shape patterns of variation; it is also
likely that the visual-gestural modality also shapes the nature of
variation.

Part of our NZSL variation project is investigating which groups
favour which variants (alternate sign forms). We selected 80 target
vocabulary items, and recorded the signs used by 140 deaf people for
these 80 concepts. Participants were from two main regions, and
represented three age groups as follows: 15-29 years, 30-44 years, and
45+ years. Age groups reflect historical changes in school policy on
signing: people in the 15-29 group have potentially (though not all)
been exposed to use of NZSL in education from 1993 onwards, and
many have also been mainstreamed. Participants in the 30-44 age
group experienced Australasian Signed English introduced in 1979.
People in the 45+ group were educated in residential schools or deaf
units using oral methods, but using NZSL in private.

17http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/research/deafstudies/DSRU site/NZSL vari-

ation/variation project.aspx
The lexical data is now being analysed to find out how variants correlate with age, region, gender and ethnicity of signers. For the purposes of this paper, we will report on just three examples from the 80 items, to illustrate the extent and reasons for variation.

Sample of findings on lexical variation

Example 1: Father

Two main variants were produced for father. Their use was strongly linked to age. Overall, the V2 (variant 2) is used more, but older signers favour V1, while younger signers favour the newer V2. This suggests that V2 will take over in the future.

Example 2: Lawyer

Four main variants were produced for lawyer. V2 and V4 are the earliest NZSL signs — originating from the verb 'write' and 'court' (gavel), respectively. V1 (pictured with a 'Y' handshape, but more often made with an 'L' handshape) is borrowed from Auslan, and V3 is originally from ASL. It is not surprising that the two recent borrowings are used mainly by the youngest age group, with the older forms (V2 and V4) favoured by older signers.

Results for lawyer show external influences on NZSL through increased international contact in recent decades, through Deaf sport, educational exchanges, personal travel, and international conferences. The number of current variants for lawyer also shows the extent of variation that NZSL interpreters are likely to encounter.
Example 3: Samoa

We recorded 10 different signs for Samoa; three of these are shown as examples in Figure 3. With so many current variants, Samoa could be described as an 'unstable' item in the lexicon. This lexical item is apparently undergoing change in response to changing social norms about how to describe ethnicity, and probably a regional (Northern) increase in contact with Samoan people due to immigration in recent decades.

Figure 3: Samoa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant 1</th>
<th>Variant 2</th>
<th>Variant 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Sign 1" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Sign 2" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sign 3" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall 14%</th>
<th>Overall 13%</th>
<th>Overall 12%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South signs 44%</td>
<td>South signs 10%</td>
<td>South signs 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North signs 22%</td>
<td>North signs 19.8%</td>
<td>North signs 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+ yrs 49%</td>
<td>45+ yrs 2%</td>
<td>45+ yrs 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-30 yrs 6%</td>
<td>30-45 yrs 14%</td>
<td>30-45 yrs 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15-30 yrs 20%</td>
<td>15-30 yrs 24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both age and region affect signers' preferences for these three variants. V1 is the traditional NZSL sign for Samoa, also used for Maori; this variant is slightly ahead of all other variants, and is favoured by older signers and Southern signers. The largest population of Samoan people live in the North, which may correspond to more variants being coined in response to the need to differentiate between Maori and Samoan identity. Samoan people themselves may also disprefer the Maori sign, encouraging use of various other signs in the region where Samoan people are more visible in the Deaf community. Overall, younger signers favour newer variants V2 and V3, but differ by region: V2 is favoured in the North, whereas V3 is used only in the South.

Investigating interpreter and Deaf consumer responses to variation

As these examples from our data have shown, NZSL has much lexical variation, mainly age-related. Our preliminary findings about the extent of variation in NZSL, and our experience as interpreters prompted us to consider how this affects interpreters on the job, and whether Deaf people regard lexical variation as an issue in interpreted situations. We wanted to find out what interpreters think about variation, what strategies they use to deal with it on the job, and how Deaf consumers perceive interpreter responses to variation. Finally, we aimed to highlight any implications for interpreter training.

To investigate these questions, we held two focus group interviews with five interpreters and five Deaf people of mixed ages and backgrounds. The interpreter group interview was conducted by an interpreter, and the Deaf group interview was conducted by a Deaf person. All participants knew each other and the facilitators, and discussions were relaxed and open. Each of the focus groups began by viewing some videotaped examples of variants we had found for several signs, in order to stimulate their awareness of the topic and to
get discussion going. This was an effective strategy, and we found that participants had a lot to say about variation. Each focus group was videotaped, and their comments were transcribed in a mixture of summary notes and verbatim quotes. Themes in their responses to our questions were identified. We now report on interpreters’ and Deaf peoples’ views about several key themes that were discussed.

**Reasons for variation**

The interpreters in our focus group thought that age is a major cause of lexical variation. One interpreter said ‘I honestly think that age is a huge factor predominantly from my experiences. So I mean you’ve got old sign, new sign, and now you’ve got new new sign…’. Interpreters probably notice age variation because they work with a wide range of consumers in the community who may have very different styles of signing, depending on their generation. Interpreters also thought that school attended, and the influence of ASL are factors that contribute to variation in the NZSL lexicon.

Similarly, the Deaf participants thought that age group influences variation. They also identified technology changes, social network, and region as reasons for variation within NZSL. One participant said: ‘I think our signing is also influenced by how we were first exposed to sign language, or the people we hang out with’; in other words, where and with whom NZSL is acquired, and social networks. Another pointed out: ‘Hometown, where you live also influences variation. For example, Auckland and Wellington have different signs. In reality, we can’t standardise all signing due to geographical differences’.

It is interesting that both groups identified age as influencing lexical variation; this is the factor most strongly supported by our research findings. It was only the Deaf group, however, who commented on more personal reasons for variation such as social networks (which naturally overlaps with regional location), and language acquisition background.

**Is lexical variation a problem for interpreting?**
The perception of variation as problematic for the interpreting process was slightly different between the two groups. Deaf participants agreed that as long as the interpreter can be understood, it does not matter if they use a variant that does not match the consumer’s usual sign. One Deaf person said:

‘The most important thing for me is that I understand the interpreter. So it doesn’t matter if they use different signing, as long as I understand them’. For the Deaf consumers then, meaning is more important than form. However the interpreters felt that variation can be challenging to work with. The prospect of recognizing and using alternate variants and individual styles can be daunting for new interpreters just out of training. One interpreter said: ‘You’re expected to arrive at the (training) course with a particular level of language and that you’re going to be learning lots and lots more. The problem is that the version, the variety of NZSL that you learn there isn’t necessarily the variety that you’re gonna be using in the workplace’.

**Sign choice within the interpreting situation**

Interpreters raised some issues around being non-native users of NZSL. One experienced interpreter said:

‘As an interpreter you’re more open to criticism about how you use the language even if you use it very similarly very native like to other people it’s still… we’re obvious targets…’.

It is true that interpreters are highly visible. If interpreters are seen in the public arena as de facto ‘language experts’, then their choices matter: if they are seen to be an official reflection and transmitter of Deaf community language use, then they would need to be scrutinized and kept in line with community preferences. At the same time, most NZSL interpreters are second language learners of NZSL. Unfortu-
nately none of our interpreter participants had Deaf parents; it would have been interesting to explore the views of native signer interpreters on this point.

We asked Deaf participants if they ever asked the interpreters to change their signs while interpreting, and this quote sums up the response of the whole group:

'Most of the time, if an interpreter uses different signing, I just leave it. But if the sign is not appropriate for that situation I will give them feedback and show them how to sign it in the right way'.

The Deaf participants also described situations where interpreters had used inappropriate signs, but had not changed their sign choice following prompting from the Deaf consumer. For example, one person said:

'One interpreter used a different sign for Napier [a city in New Zealand] and I showed them how to sign Napier the way I do. The interpreter still continued to sign Napier in their way, so I just left it and respected that the interpreter wanted to keep using their sign. It's fine'.

Another explanation might be that this interpreter kept using their own sign not because they liked it better, but simply because they knew it better and could not re-learn a new one in the space of an interpreting assignment. Deaf consumers may not be aware that a request to change a sign choice is competing with other cognitive demands of the interpreting task.

**Interpreter strategies and limitations in dealing with variation**

We asked interpreters what strategies they have developed for working with variation. Firstly they said they tried to match the Deaf person's signs where possible and that, when they needed to, they negotiated signs with Deaf consumers. They also said they try to predict signs used by a particular group or region, and that they were very careful with signs known to be contentious, such as place names and some cardinal numbers. However, all the interpreters agreed that in difficult and stressful assignments, 'that sort of thing just goes out the window'. Often interpreters have to juggle the tasks of conscious lexical choice with the larger process of capturing meaning. This means that lexical selection often has to be executed at an automatic level for the interpreting process to function. It seems that in situations where there is not enough mental energy or time to think about language variation, selecting between sign variants takes lower priority than conveying meaning efficiently.

**Implications for interpreter training**

In terms of training, interpreters all suggested more practicum in the training course and therefore more exposure to a variety of signers. One said:

'Do more practicum and tailor it as best you can to get a range of settings, Deaf people, language use, background, literacy background'.

Another said:

'I think it's absolutely essential to make sure that there is a criteria so that students can't stay in their comfort zones... that's what practicum’s about.'

The interpreter training programme (at AUT University in Auckland) has a substantial practicum component, in the second year of training in which students spend 70 hours observing and teaming with experienced interpreters in various settings. Interpreters emphasised the value of practicum in broadening their exposure to the spectrum
of NZSL users; they see this as the most effective way to learn about variation in natural situations.

Like interpreters, Deaf people also wanted interpreter students to become aware of variation. They stressed the importance of interpreters having an open-minded approach to working with variation. One person said:

'It would be good if the course taught interpreters about variation throughout New Zealand so when they go out to work, they are aware there is variation and can be open-minded about it'.

Another said:

'Variation is natural. Interpreters need to be aware about sign language, so if they go to a new area, they meet Deaf people to learn the signs used in that area'.

Conclusions

While interpreters and Deaf consumers are aware of lexical variation in interpreting situations, overall they believe that it rarely impairs understanding since Deaf signers usually recognise the range of signs variants used in the NZSL community. Interpreters and Deaf people differed slightly in how they explained the causes of lexical variation: interpreters commented more on generational differences and outside influences on the language (both features of language change), while Deaf people commented more on personal factors such as the influence of who they socialise with (regional and peer networks), and how and when sign language is acquired by individuals. Interpreters' observations about outside influences on vocabulary may reflect their frequent experience in situations where new concepts/terms arise for translation, and Deaf people may borrow foreign (eg. ASL or BSL) vocabulary if it is available in the language environment.

Sign choice may have different significance in interpreted situations than in Deaf-to-Deaf interaction for several reasons:

(i) An interpreter's function is to facilitate understanding as unobtrusively as possible, without the form distracting from the message - which can occur when an interpreter uses lexical variants different from consumer preference.

(ii) Most interpreters are second language users and as such, their use of sign language may be more critically observed by consumers.

(iii) Interpreters may be perceived as having some normative (standardizing) influence on the language by privileging certain signs over others. We would thus expect Deaf consumers' views about whether variation is a problem in interpreting situations to differ from their perception of variation in Deaf-Deaf communication, and also to differ from interpreters' views. Indeed, we found that interpreters are more concerned than Deaf consumers about the impact of variation on interpreting, and novice interpreters in particular express anxiety about dealing with unfamiliar sign variants on the job.

Strategies that interpreters identified for working with variation included the following: increasing personal exposure to variation in the NZSL community, consulting with Deaf consumers about sign choice where possible, and being particularly aware of selection of signs that have obvious social sensitivities. But interpreters also realistically comment that even when they want to attend to audience preferences, negotiating sign choices in mid-flow is not always feasible, due to the cognitive demands of processing the ongoing communication, or
when a diverse audience has different lexical preferences. It is not always possible for interpreters to strike the ideal balance between their consciousness of lexical variants, consumer preferences, and demands of the interpreting process.

In terms of professional preparation, interpreters and Deaf people agree that learning about variation is an important element in interpreter training—through explicit teaching and through extensive immersion in a wide range of Deaf community contexts. Effective preparation for working with lexical variation requires language teachers and interpreter trainers to have enough sociolinguistic knowledge to develop a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to variation in language. Empirical research on variation in signed languages is important in providing accurate information about how and why variation is patterned across the community.

Finally, we suggest that discussions—like those held in our focus groups—between linguists, Deaf consumers, interpreters, and interpreter trainers about variation would help to illuminate aspects of the interpreting process for both practitioners and consumers. As a further step in this project, we envisage professional development workshops that continue to make a connection between research findings on NZSL, and reflection on interpreting practice.

Acknowledgements

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REFERENCES:


Summary

The National Research Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NRASLI) is a group of sign language interpreters and people who learn sign language. It began in 1974 and now has over 11,000 members.

NRASLI has studied interpreting conditions every five years since 1990. This report is from their 2005 survey of sign language interpreters.

Complete count survey: Analyzed by NASLI and SHIGA Medical University

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*This investigation contains a health survey, including labor and other social conditions.