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Proceedings of Conference on
Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory

Edited by Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond & David Nathan

7-8 December 2007 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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ISBN: 978-0-7286-0382-0

This paper can be cited as:

Ulrike Zeshan. 2007. The ethics of documenting sign languages in village communities. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond & David Nathan (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory*. London: SOAS. pp. 269-279.

or:

Ulrike Zeshan. 2007. The ethics of documenting sign languages in village communities. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond & David Nathan (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory*. London: SOAS. www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt_31.pdf

The ethics of documenting sign languages in village communities

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1. INTRODUCING VILLAGE SIGN LANGUAGES

Sign languages are the natural visual-gestural languages of deaf communities, using the hands, facial expressions, and head and body positions to convey linguistic messages. The grammatical structures of sign languages are parallel to those of spoken languages at every level of linguistic organisation including the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels (cf. e.g. Klima & Bellugi 1979, Padden 1988, Lillo-Martin & Sandler 2006). Sign languages are used by communities of deaf people in all regions of the world, and differ from one another in both lexicon and grammar (cf. Zeshan 2006).

Most sign language users are in a situation where they constitute a linguistic and cultural minority in constant contact with the surrounding dominant spoken language or languages, and they often face serious linguistic oppression from the dominant language community. However, there is a second type of situation that is radically different from the better-known linguistic minority situation mostly found in urban centres around the world. This is the case of small rural communities, often in a single village, with a history of genetic hereditary deafness over several generations. This kind of situation was first documented on the island of Martha's Vineyard off the US east coast (Groce 1988) and accordingly is sometimes referred to as 'Martha's Vineyard situation'. Since then, similar sociolinguistic characteristics have been identified in a number of other rural locations, including, for instance, a Mayan community on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico (Johnson 1994), a village in northern Thailand (Nonaka 2004), an Arab Bedouin tribe in Israel (Sandler et al 2005), and a village in Ghana (Nyst 2007).

Although these settings are geographically and culturally very diverse, they all have certain sociolinguistic characteristics in common: all the communities have developed indigenous sign languages as a response to the presence of hereditary deafness over several generations, though the time depth varies from several hundred years to only 70 years. Most importantly, the sign language is used freely by both the hearing and the deaf members of the community. Therefore, the deaf members of these communities are typically integrated into everyday village life and do not face the severe communication barriers that are so typical of urban deaf communities. Because of this important difference, the communities in such rural settings have also been called 'integrated deaf communities' (Marsaja, forthcoming) or 'shared signing communities' (Kisch 2007). For ease of reference and to emphasise the contrast between the typically

rural and typically urban settings, I refer to ‘village sign languages’ and ‘deaf villages’¹ in the rest of this paper.

2. STATE OF DOCUMENTATION

Deaf villages have been documented from the 1960’s onwards, but the documentation has almost exclusively been in terms of ethnography and anthropology. Indeed, the socio-cultural setting in these communities is extremely interesting and well worth studying in detail. However, documentation of these cases in previous decades has produced virtually no detailed documentation of the sign languages themselves. It is only in recent years that researchers have looked at some of these sign languages from a linguistic point of view. The first-ever detailed studies of both the signing community and the structures of the village sign language have only just been completed (Nyst 2007, Marsaja, forthcoming).

Unfortunately, a number of village sign languages have already died out without ever being documented from a linguistic point of view, the sign language used on Martha’s Vineyard being the most prominent example. A number of village sign languages are currently endangered or even on the brink of extinction. For instance, it is not known whether the signing documented among the Urubu tribe in the Brazilian Amazon mentioned in Kakumasu (1968) is still in existence.

The lack of linguistic documentation of these village sign languages is all the more unfortunate because the recent detailed linguistic studies have shown that their structures can differ radically from what we know about urban sign languages all over the world. Indeed, a number of structural properties that used to be posited as universal across all sign languages are now being called into question by evidence from village sign languages. This relates, in particular, to the use of the signing space for grammatical purposes that is so characteristic of sign languages as opposed to spoken languages (see Nyst 2007 for some striking examples).

3. CASE STUDIES

In this paper, I present two case studies of recent research on sign languages in two village communities. Rather than focusing on the results of this research, whether linguistic or otherwise, I am concerned with a range of ethical issues that arise from doing research in this particular context. The two deaf village situations are used as case studies to illustrate the issues and report on the particular way in which researchers are trying to respond to them.

The first case concerns a village community in northern Bali known locally as ‘Desa Kolok’, which is Balinese for ‘deaf village’. This is a community of about 2,500 people and about 50 deaf individuals, distributed throughout the 10

¹ This is not meant to be strictly limited to a single village. Indeed, some village sign languages are used by a group of villages or by (semi-)nomadic tribes.

clans in the village. The time depth for the presence of deafness in this village is considerable and thought to be about several hundred years (Marsaja, forthcoming). In line with the pattern of documentation explained above, first-time documentation was in terms of the socio-cultural and socio-linguistic setting (Branson, Miller & Marsaja 1996, 1999). More recently, the Sign Language Typology Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) in the Netherlands has worked on the linguistic documentation of the sign language Kata Kolok ('deaf language') (Perniss & Zeshan, forthcoming, Schwager & Zeshan, forthcoming). The group has since moved to the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in Preston, UK, and work continues in cooperation between the MPI and UCLan. Deaf children are still born in the village, and the sign language is currently used by all age groups, including acquisition by children as a first language. There is a boarding school for deaf children in a town not too far away, but very few of the deaf children from Desa Kolok have attended this school so far, as most stay in the village during school age.

The second case concerns a village sign language known locally as 'Country Sign', used in the community of Top Hill (St. Elizabeth region) in Jamaica (Cumberbatch 2006). Signing among this village population was first mentioned in Dolman (1986), where the author reported a very high number of deaf individuals. The sign language has since been in sharp decline due to people moving away from the village on the one hand, and deaf education being introduced into the village on the other hand. The local deaf school uses Jamaican Sign Language, the dominant urban sign language which is strongly influenced by American Sign Language. Therefore, young deaf people from the village no longer use Country Sign amongst each other, preferring to use Jamaican Sign Language, and indeed, most young people only know bits and pieces of Country Sign now. It is currently not clear whether there are any monolingual users of Country Sign left, and how many people, in particular older deaf people, are still fluent users of Country Sign in addition to being fluent in Jamaican Sign Language. The University of Central Lancashire in the UK and the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Jamaica have a joint project trying to document the current state of Country Sign, including a documentation of its linguistic structures as far as possible.

4. ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE DOCUMENTATION OF VILLAGE SIGN LANGUAGES

In April 2006, the Sign Language Typology Research Group hosted a workshop in the Netherlands which, for the first time, brought together most of the current researchers working in deaf villages. In addition to exchanging information about individual field sites, several hours of the workshop were taken up by discussing the particular ethics around documenting this kind of community and the associated sign language. Another workshop will take place in February 2008 at UCLan in the UK and includes a special session on village and other minority

sign languages as well as a round table session on research ethics. Such workshops are important in order to raise awareness about these issues among researchers and exchange views on developing best practice. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the main ethical issues emerging from research on deaf villages and then come back to the two case studies to show how these issues can be addressed by researchers. The aim of the discussion is to focus on issues that are particular to such field sites only, rather than addressing more general issues, such as informed consent, access to data, etc., that apply to any language documentation project.

One of the problematic issues to be considered is that village sign languages are currently a very popular topic in sign language linguistics and beyond. As mentioned above, the sociolinguistic situation in itself is a compelling story, as is instantiated by a recent popular account of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin community in Israel (Fox 2007). Interest within the sign linguistics research community is furthered by recent important findings about theoretically important particularities of village sign languages. Given this situation, some first-time researchers who have worked in deaf villages are concerned that publishing their findings, including the location of the village, may lead to an ‘invasion’ of other eager researchers into the village, with consequences for the community that are difficult to foresee. This could include research not only on language and culture, but also and perhaps more worryingly, biological research on the genetics of deafness. How far are the first researchers in a deaf village responsible for things subsequently going wrong or getting out of hand because of an uncontrolled influx of researchers into the village? Should they rather keep the details of the location a secret and publish their work without referring to the true name and location of the village? Apart from protecting a potentially vulnerable community, do the first researchers in a deaf village have any legitimacy to be ‘in charge’ of who does or does not conduct further research in the village after them?

Another angle concerns access to research results for the target village community. This ethical consideration is not unlike what is already being discussed with respect to other field sites. Increasingly, researchers are supposed to make their research results accessible to the communities they are studying. They are supposed to create materials, in addition to scientific documentation and publication, that the target community can understand and, if appropriate, use for their own purposes. It is generally recognised that this is a good way of ‘giving back to the community’ as well as a good way of educating the target community about the research being done and its significance for others and themselves. However, in deaf villages the problem is compounded by the fact that the most important individuals, that is, the deaf members of the community, may need communication through a visual language. In several documented cases, the deaf individuals in the village do not have access to any kind of formal education and are monolingual in the village sign language. Making research accessible in this language poses particular communicative as well as technical challenges, since any materials will have to be in the form of video films.

Sign language linguists as a group are, more than in other sub-branches of linguistics, very familiar with the principles of ‘giving back to the community’.

After all, it has been their influence that has given legitimacy and recognition to sign languages in many parts of the world, and many sign linguists are involved with designing educational materials that can be used in the education of deaf children and adults, in sign language interpreter training courses, and the like. However, the case of deaf villages is different in that unlike urban sign languages, the village sign languages have never been in a state of oppression. They are used by both hearing and deaf villagers, and there is usually no strong stigma involved in being deaf or communicating through sign language. In this case, it is not clear what a sign language linguist can or should be contributing to such a community. Given that the sign language is already in wide use, does it need to be promoted or protected in any particular way?

The most important consideration for a developing research ethics in this context is the issue of language endangerment. As already mentioned, some village sign languages are endangered, sometimes seriously so. The case of endangerment of village sign languages is not a straightforward one and in fact places the considerate researcher in a serious conundrum. In a sense, a village sign language is a minority within a minority, that is, a small-scale sign language used in a country with a larger, urban-based sign language which is in turn surrounded by majority spoken languages. This situation creates particular dynamics that can lead to the endangerment and death of the village sign language.

Factors leading to the endangerment and death of village sign languages are both inherent in and internal to the situation. First of all, there is the question as to the very nature of this particular language situation and the effect it has on the life cycle of the sign language. Nonaka (2004) explains how village sign languages may arise suddenly, thrive briefly and fall into disuse just as suddenly again. This is because they are strongly tied to the presence of deaf people in the village. If, due to new marriage patterns, migration away from the village, or whatever other reason, deaf people no longer live in the village, there is no need for the sign language to continue and it potentially falls into disuse and disappears very quickly. In other cases, of course, the presence of deaf people in a particular village has been continuous for many generations.

In addition to this 'natural' life cycle, however, there are also external factors that threaten the survival of village sign languages. Paradoxically, it is the strengthening of urban deaf communities that is most effective in bringing about the endangerment of village sign languages. In several documented cases, for example in Thailand, Jamaica and Ghana, the urban sign languages have spread to rural areas, which in itself is a positive development because it allows access to the sign language for deaf people in rural areas who are otherwise cut off from the deaf community in their countries. Moreover, deaf education tends to begin in urban centres and then spread to less populated rural areas as it consolidates its place in the educational infrastructure of a country. For the deaf villages, this means that their local sign language begins to be in contact, and thus in competition, with a sign language used by a larger and more educated deaf community of higher status. At this point, the sign language may be replaced by the larger sign language even if there is a continuous presence of deaf people in

the village, as has indeed happened in the case of Country Sign, and also in Ghana.

A number of factors are in collusion for creating the scenario that threatens village sign languages: access to the urban sign language; contact with urban deaf people; access to deaf schools that use the urban sign language; and most importantly and pervasively, the attitudes towards the two sign languages. Invariably, it is the village sign language that is seen as ‘not a proper language’, less developed and of lower status, a scenario that is all too familiar from spoken languages that are endangered. Given this scenario, what, if any, is the role of researchers, in particular linguists, in these developments? Should the village sign language be ‘protected’ from the encroachment of the urban sign language, or is it more important for the deaf villagers to participate in the wider urban deaf community? Can and should researchers influence language attitudes to work towards equal respect for all sign languages used in a country? If you have fought for recognition and respect for a national sign language, do you equally need to fight for a minority sign language? Such questions are of course also asked in spoken language linguistics wherever researchers work with minority languages. However, in sign linguistics, the research tradition is to take these issues rather more seriously, and at the same time, sign linguists tend to be unfamiliar with rural areas and their cultural norms, particularly in developing countries where most of the deaf villages are located. Given that deaf communities are mostly centered around urban areas and the discovery of village sign languages is still very new in sign linguistics, not enough thought and discussion has gone into considering the ethical questions behind this particular type of field situation. It is ironic that the very success of fighting for the sign language of one signing community should bring about the endangerment of other signing communities that are minorities within a minority. It is also ironic that urban deaf sign language users, who have been subject to negative linguistic stereotyping themselves, should in turn practise the same prejudice against smaller signing communities in rural areas.

5. ADDRESSING THE ETHICS: LESSONS FROM THE TWO CASE STUDIES

We now return to our two case studies, Kata Kolok and Country Sign. The two sign languages are in quite different situations, the former one being still well and alive, learned by children and used in many communicative situations by both deaf and hearing villagers, while the latter is already on the brink of extinction. How can researchers begin to respond to some of the ethical issues raised in the previous sections?

For Kata Kolok, there has already been a history of substantial research in the village, both genetic and linguistic. The Sign Language Typology Research Group began work on Desa Kolok in 2005, forming a Kata Kolok sub-group. The sub-group consisted of a hearing post-doctoral researcher from a neighbouring Balinese village, a hearing informant fluent in Kata Kolok from the village, a

European deaf native sign language user, and myself. We considered it important to work with people from within the wider region and the village, but at the same time ethically inappropriate to move a deaf villager to the Netherlands for the long time period needed to get the project work done, which ended up being one-and-a-half years. Over time, our group consulted with the inhabitants of Desa Kolok, using the Balinese group members as intermediaries, and two field visits took place during the project period. We discovered that the deaf children in Desa Kolok had traditionally never been admitted to the existing primary schools, although some of the teachers are from the village and able to use Kata Kolok. Therefore, a consultation process took place in the village to find out whether a school project would be appropriate for Desa Kolok that would allow the deaf children and young adults to participate in basic schooling along with hearing people in the village. Initially, we tried a literacy and numeracy project for the teenagers and young deaf adults, which failed to take off and had to be discontinued. Finally, and again with the help of our local Balinese contacts, it was decided at local government level that the deaf children should attend the local school. The hearing informant from the village had by then returned to Bali and is employed as in-situ research assistant by the MPI in Nijmegen, while at the same time teaching in the school. Schooling in the lower primary classes is only for a couple of hours every day even for the hearing children. At the moment, five deaf children of primary school age have been admitted to the deaf class in the local school and are being taught through Kata Kolok. The inhabitants of Desa Kolok felt strongly against introducing any other sign language or signing system, since teaching it would disrupt the link between the deaf and hearing villagers through their common sign language. It was therefore agreed by all parties that the deaf classroom would run through Kata Kolok.

This deaf classroom in a signing village community is a very interesting experiment that has never taken place before. Our group is monitoring the situation in order to see whether it can serve as a sustainable model for other similar situations. Some adjustment to the signing used in the classroom has already been found necessary, and use of the manual alphabet (fingerspelling) has been adopted from the sign language used in deaf schools elsewhere in Bali. These changes are driven by what participants in the classroom, most importantly the teacher-cum-research-assistant, feel is necessary for their purposes. As a side effect, this situation will be a very interesting source of child language data as well as a unique situation of a classroom setting where all children are native signers.

The philosophy of this approach is inspired by the familiar principle of researchers' contributions to the communities they work in. A rather strong version of this requirement can be found on the website of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Linguistics Department, which states:

Members of the department must, wherever possible, ensure that they contribute to the communities in which they work. Exceptions to this policy can only be considered in truly unusual circumstances where implementation of the policy is impossible,

and such exceptions require detailed justification and the approval of the department director.
 (<http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/ethics.html>, accessed 19 November 2007).

However, the actions in Desa Kolok are also inspired by a particular rationale that tries to address researchers' responsibilities towards this kind of community. We suggest that researchers cannot permanently 'protect' a deaf village communities of this kind. Moreover, there can be no justification for researchers to feel 'in charge' of a community in terms of trying to prevent other research from happening. On the other hand, it would also be inappropriate for researchers not to be proactive in any way on behalf of the community, given that they, unlike the target communities, know about potential problems arising from their work and its dissemination. Therefore, it seems most appropriate that these communities should, over time, be empowered to deal themselves with issues about research on their communities and the effects this may have. Training for important people in the village itself plays a very important role here, in this case, in the form of the in-situ research assistant. It may also be hoped that using Kata Kolok in the deaf classroom will raise the prestige of the local sign language and make it less likely to be abandoned whole-sale in favour of a larger sign language used in a residential deaf school. Moreover, deaf children who are now receiving education along with their hearing peers could later act as important stakeholders in issues concerning the local sign language.

It remains to be seen how this experiment will turn out. Whatever its eventual result, it can at least be said that the local Kata Kolok using community has been involved with the decisions at each step of the project development, and that through trial and error a structure has been found that seems viable at least for the immediate future.

As mentioned above, the situation of Country Sign in Jamaica is very different in all respects. It is immediately clear that no one-size-fits-all approach can be considered at all. First of all, research on Country Sign has only just begun, so a long-standing relationship with the local community still needs to be developed. However, the principles of a working plan are already established. In fact, ethical issues in terms of the aims of our work were considered before the project began. The University of Central Lancashire and the University of the West Indies signed an agreement for joint research into Country Sign in 2006, which stated 'a by-product of the Country Sign Research Project would be that the residents of the Top Hill community embrace Country Sign as a heritage language'.

As anyone working with endangered languages knows, no researcher can enforce pressure on a community to prefer one language over another, and neither should this happen. However, the above concept of a 'heritage language' means something different. It means that the members of the community recognise their own linguistic history for what it is, and maybe even take pride in the fact that they have their very own village sign language. Even if the younger deaf people in the area now exclusively use the urban Jamaican Sign Language with each other,

the researchers in the project will make an effort to discover the linguistic history of the village in partnership with the residents of Top Hill. At the same time, this happens to be the most viable way of getting sound research results, since we obviously need the cooperation of people from Top Hill to discover the remains of Country Sign.

It seems unlikely that Country Sign will again be used as the main sign language in this particular village community. One reason is that the composition of its population has been less stable than in Desa Kolok in Bali. Another reason is the presence of the Jamaican Sign Language using deaf school in the village. As researchers, we can take several measures to offer a 'heritage language' option for Country Sign to the residents. It will then be up to the residents to decide whether Country Sign might again be used for everyday communication in the village, or will be something that is known only passively. Again, it will be crucial here to involve people from the local community itself in the research project. We are not at this stage yet, so at the moment, the research group includes a sign language researcher from the Jamaican Sign Language Unit of UWI in the capital Kingston and a research student from the same university as the local Jamaican partners. Hopefully it will be possible to recruit research assistants from the Top Hill community itself once the project moves on from the present pilot stage.

Two measures seem most important in a situation such as Top Hill. The local community, both in the village and in the urban areas, has to be educated about the minority village sign language. Discrimination against Country Sign from Jamaican Sign Language users is less likely if both communities are educated about the linguistic facts. Otherwise, urban sign language users, whether in Jamaica or elsewhere, may feel it is their responsibility to bring the 'proper sign language' to the uneducated village community, unaware that they are looking down upon a perfectly viable language that may suit the local community needs much better than their own sign language. It may of course be the case that the urban sign language is indeed preferred by the village community, but at least this can then, to the extent possible, be an informed choice.

Secondly, if the concept of a heritage sign language in deaf villages with endangered sign languages is to have any meaning, resources and materials are needed to support such a process. Researchers can play a real role here and follow in the footsteps of similar successful activities carried out with speakers of endangered spoken languages. In the case of Top Hill, the already existing infrastructure, that is, the deaf school in the village, could be used. For example, while collecting Country Sign data for research, accessible resources should be created that could be used in the classroom. If indeed fluent elderly users of Country Sign can still be found, their stories in terms of the local history, recorded in Country Sign, can form the basis for lessons on the linguistic heritage of the village. Lessons would, in all likelihood, still be given in Jamaican Sign Language, but the topic could involve local history with prepared samples of Country Sign and maybe even visits to the school by elderly Country Sign users.

By and large, sign language linguists are, though very familiar with issues of language politics and linguistic discrimination in general, still completely unpractised in dealing with sign language endangerment, especially in complex

cases such as the village communities exemplified in this paper. Hopefully, using experiences from spoken language situations as well as extending awareness about such issues from urban to rural signing communities will prove beneficial to a culture of fair dealing between researchers and target communities in the future.

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