A commentary on: Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family

Article

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Reappropriation of Gendered Irish Sign Language in One Family[1]

Barbara LeMaster

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Introduction

Barbara LeMaster's article "Reappropriation of Gendered Irish Sign Language in One Family" in *Visual Anthropology Review* piqued my interest with its initial sentence:

> *The native vocabularies of one segment of the Dublin deaf community (i.e., primarily women over 70 and men over 55) contain different signs for the majority of common lexical items examined (LeMaster 1990).*

From this I learned that there existed different female and male signs in Irish Sign Language. This intrigued me and led me to explore further, despite recognizing that I was probably out of my comfort zone. I would be addressing a topic of social history, through my lens of theoretical and empirical aspects of communication design. Curiously, I rejected a more comfortable choice of an article that uses an approach far more familiar to me: research analyzing the covers of introductory texts on cultural anthropology (Hammond et al., 2009). I am therefore acutely aware that the questions I ask about Irish Sign Language not only stem from another discipline, but also introduce different research methods. I also suspect that some of the issues I raise are covered elsewhere, either by LeMaster or by other researchers. This I regard as a positive sign of considerable overlap between our disciplines.

In the following commentary on LeMaster's article, I start with a brief account of what I consider to be main themes within the article. This is not a comprehensive summary, but sets the scene for discussion points. I then propose some general differences in approach and emphasis between the disciplines of visual anthropology, as represented in this article, and communication design. Although I have situated myself within a particular sector of communication design (in the introduction), I have nonetheless tried to cover a wider field encompassing design practitioners and historians. From more general topics, I narrow down to specific areas that might inform, or be informed by, graphic communication research: the process of language standardization and dictionary design. The final section on signs moves us some distance from LeMaster's study. However, personally, one of the most exciting aspects of research is forging links between apparently disparate areas of research, which might require a leap in the dark.

Summary of LeMaster's article

After an introduction where LeMaster explains how gendered Irish Sign Language came about, she explores the change from an environment of sign language alone in Dublin deaf schools to the introduction of oralism (lip-reading and speaking). This change has consequences for communication across generations and genders. A case study of one family of seven deaf people, with different experiences of signing and oralism, uncovers interesting inconsistencies in the use of gendered signs. These are discussed in relation to the concept of "survivals" of gendered Irish Sign Language and how their transmission by something other than gender may be tracked. The research aims to uncover how different signs co-exist and are reshaped or reappropriated over time, identifying linguistic social networks.

Overview of differences in approach between disciplines

The main thrust of the article is the identification of sociocultural factors that explain the development of the language. Examples of the visual-gestural language, signing and dictionaries, are used as a means of discussing the socialization experiences. The anthropological study of the forms of signs, i.e., the sign variations, consists of identifying their gender and meaning. The visual and gestural details are relevant only in observing similarities or differences in form.

Researchers who study the history of graphic communication may be comfortable with this visual anthropological approach. Some of their questions concern the context and meaning of design decisions. If they were to restrict their investigations to the visual representations of the language, they may miss sociocultural factors that might better inform their study of artifacts. In this case, graphic communication researchers who do not have access to the linguistic history might misinterpret reasons for changes in Irish Sign Language over time.

But visual details (of dictionaries and signs) are of primary interest to graphic communication researchers and practitioners. The context of use is also important to practicing designers, as it will influence design decisions, but context tends to be interpreted more narrowly. Rather than considering societal issues, such as socialization experiences, communication designers are more concerned with how individuals use visual language, closer to a psychological approach than sociological.

Language standardization

A section of McMaster's article introduces Irish Sign Language dictionaries and describes the process of writing a dictionary through a committee in 1979, whose members voted on whether to include the male or female form. The goals, procedure, and outcomes are briefly summarized, and prompt many more questions. What were the criteria used to choose the signs, other than a bias toward male signs? Were some signs considered easier to interpret than others? Were similarities among different signs a reason to reject signs from inclusion in the dictionary? When signs were invented, were there any guiding principles? Of course, to address these questions a record of the dictionary committee's decisions would be needed, either through minutes from the meetings or by conducting oral history interviews.

An interesting example of the interplay between social and visual is in this standardization and legitimization of language through dictionaries. LeMaster explains that it was not socially acceptable for older men to use female forms of signs, but younger male signers used female signs from the dictionary. The importance of the origins of signs in determining their acceptability, rather than what they look like, suggests that the criteria for selecting or inventing signs may have had little to do with their visual and gestural characteristics. Although this might be disappointing from a design perspective, such knowledge nonetheless informs graphic communication researchers. More than thirty years on from the original research, we might establish whether the origins of the signs retain their importance or whether they have evolved to accentuate visual differences and aid intelligibility.

Dictionary design

The 1979 dictionary, and the revision and reprint in 1996, provide LeMaster with a means of tracing the source of some uses of gendered signs. But these publications also present an opportunity to examine the design of the dictionaries. Documents such as these are important primary sources for typographic researchers, and comparisons with other sign language dictionaries would determine whether the publications used typographic conventions found in other dictionaries of the time.

Some examples of dictionary entries are provided within the paper and further research might analyze the typographic and graphic treatment of different elements of the entries. Dictionaries are complex texts that require typographic coding to differentiate individual structural elements. As a practicing designer of dictionaries, Luna (2004) asked how far typographic treatment maps the underlying structure in a

logical, consistent, and transparent manner. The design of sign language dictionaries must also deal with the inclusion of images. How might static traditional printed dictionaries compare with current dynamic resources of online videos?[1]

The 1979 dictionary is described as being used in sections of the Dublin residential deaf schools and in sign language classes. No mention is made of dictionaries in homes, or how the 1996 version was accessed. Such details inform designers of the narrower context of use, which may have had implications for how accessible these were in terms of their availability and ease of use. How many individuals owned a copy? LeMaster asks whether knowledge of the origins of the signs included in the 1996 edition has any effect on usage of the signs. This might depend on the salience of this element within the entry, determined by the typographic treatment.

The signs

My initial, somewhat naïve, enthusiasm for this topic imagined that a logical area of research for communication researchers would be the signs themselves, not just how they are depicted in dictionaries. The article includes somewhat vague references to signs looking "virtually identical in form," "similar in form," and "just different." What constitutes similarity in form? What is the range of variation?

The difficulty of answering these questions became apparent after doing a little research, which clarified that the signs are distinguished along three main parameters. LeMaster uses the terms "handshape," "movement," and "point of origin." A systematic analysis of these complex signs to describe how their visual and gestural characteristics differ from each other would pose a significant challenge.

My background in studying perception steers me toward exploring how the distinctions between signs are perceived and how this maps onto the visual or physical differences in the signs. This brings in other disciplines, such as linguistics and psychology. Studies of American Sign Language (ASL) have shown that sign language experience affects the perception of handshape distinctions. Deaf signers perceive distinctions in a different way to hearing non-signers (Emmorey et al., 2003). The age of acquisition of ASL also affects perceptual processing of handshapes (Morford et al., 2008). If similar studies were undertaken on Irish Sign Language with deaf signers of different generations and genders, might we find that their language differences affect how the same signs are perceived?

1 For example, https://www.britishsignlanguage.com/.

Conclusion

LeMaster's article presents a fascinating insight into cultural aspects of Ireland's deaf history. Although the gendered language differences are at the center of the research, the nature of the sign differences are illustrated, but not analyzed. But given the importance of the sociocultural factors in the development of the language, this knowledge is a necessary part of interpreting any visual analysis. This example of visual anthropological research has the potential to complement and enhance theoretical and empirical approaches to communication design and appears to overlap with historical research.

Postscript

I feel I must comment on the typesetting of the title. A very awkward line break has been inserted. Are we meant to read "Reappropriation of gendered" as a meaningful phrase?

References

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Author

Mary Dyson started by studying experimental psychology with a PhD in perception. She then moved into the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, UK, to a position that was linked to the field of Electronic Publishing, as it was called in the 1980s. Her teaching and research involved theoretical and empirical approaches to typography and graphic communication. Mary's early research therefore looked at reading from screen and the effects of typographic variables on reading speed, reading strategies, and comprehension, closely related to legibility. This developed into looking at how we read which required a focus on individual letters and typeface characteristics. She also explored what happens to people's perceptions after they receive design training. After retiring from her post in Typography & Graphic Communication, she wrote a textbook on legibility and is currently enjoying developing scholarly collaborations with former students, colleagues, and friends.