

Language contact phenomena in deaf communities¹

Ceil Lucas

Gallaudet University (Washington, USA)

Gallaudet University
Department of ASL, Linguistics and Interpretation
800 Florida Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002 – 3695, USA
CLUCAS@gallua.gallaudet.edu

Abstract

Sociolinguistic research in deaf communities has been shaped by at least four interrelated considerations: (1) the relationship between the spoken language of the majority of the community and sign language, mainly in educational settings; (2) the limited knowledge of the linguistic structure of the sign language; (3) doubts as to the status of the sign language as a “real language”; and (4) the application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations. This paper will focus specifically on language contact phenomena in deaf communities. Firstly, the general effect of each of these four considerations will be discussed, and a model of language contact phenomena will be presented, making the distinction between the outcomes of contact between two sign languages, and the outcomes of contact between a sign language and a spoken language. Secondly, the findings of an investigation of language contact in the American deaf community will be presented and discussed as they pertain to these four considerations. And thirdly, this paper will suggest directions for future research on the sociolinguistics of deaf communities.

Key words: language contact in deaf communities, Sign language, model of language contact phenomena, sociolinguistics of deaf communities.

Resumo

A investigación sociolingüística en comunidades de xordos foi modelada por ó menos catro consideracións relacionadas entre si: (1) a relación entre a lingua falada pola comunidade maioritaria e a lingua de signos da comunidade, principalmente nos contextos educativos; (2) o limitado coñecemento da estrutura lingüística da lingua de signos; (3) as dúbidas cara ó status da lingua de signos como unha “lingua verdadeira”; e (4) a aplicación dos modelos sociolingüísticos da lingua falada ás situacións de lingua de signos. Este estudio céntrase especificamente no fenómeno do contacto de linguas en comunidades de xordos. En primeiro lugar, discútese o efecto xeral de cada unha destas catro consideracións, e preséntase un modelo de fenómenos de contacto de linguas, facendo a distinción entre as consecuencias do contacto entre dúas linguas de signos, e as consecuencias do contacto entre unha lingua de signos e unha lingua falada. En segundo lugar, preséntanse os resultados dunha investigación do contacto de linguas na comunidade xorda americana e discútenese eses resultados tendo en conta as catro consideracións anteriores. En terceiro lugar, suxírense vías para futuras investigacións sociolingüísticas das comunidades de xordos.

¹ An earlier version of this paper appears in *Perspectives on Sign Language Usage - Report from the Fifth International Symposium on Sign Language Research, Vol. 2*, edited by Inger Ahlgren, Brita Bergman, and Mary Brennan. Durham, England: The International Sign Linguistics Association, 1994, 261-268. I am grateful to Jayne McKenzie for the preparation of the present manuscript.

Palabras clave: contacto de linguas nas comunidades de xordos, lingua de signos, modelo de fenómenos de contacto de linguas, sociolingüística das comunidades de xordos.

Sociolinguistic research on contact phenomena in deaf communities has, to date, been shaped by at least four interrelated considerations: 1) the relationship between the spoken language of the majority of the community and the sign language of the community, particularly in educational settings, 2) limited knowledge of the linguistic structure of the sign language, 3) doubts as to the status of the sign language as a “real language”, and 4) application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations. In terms of the first consideration, the traditional insistence in deaf educational settings on the use of the spoken language of the community or the use of some combined form of signing and speaking, to the exclusion of sign language has contributed to the focus in sociolinguistic research on the interaction between spoken language and sign language—in American Sign Language, for example, while there are some studies on sociolinguistic variation within ASL, there are an equal number of studies on the diglossic nature of the deaf community, on the so-called continuum of varieties between English and ASL and the outcome of contact between English and ASL traditionally labeled PSE (Pidgin Sign English) (see for example, Woodward, 1973, Woodward & Markowicz, 1975). There are very few studies, if any, that describe the result of contact between two sign languages. Part of this has been due to the second and third considerations—limited knowledge of the structure of the sign language and doubts as to its status as a “real language”. In terms of the second consideration, it is difficult to describe sociolinguistic variation within a sign language or to see what the effects of contact are until we have a clear idea of the basic structure of the language. In fact, some early studies of variation in ASL described as variable structural features such as negative incorporation and verb agreement, features which are not variable in a native signer’s production. The third consideration—doubts as to status both in sign language users and in the research community at large—is one that has hindered all areas of linguistic research on sign languages, not just sociolinguistic research. The fourth consideration—the application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations—is one that often has had the effect of assigning labels to situations that, upon re-examination, do not exactly fit the label assigned. Such is the case with the use of the terms diglossia, code switching, bilingualism, and pidgin, among others.

Based on these four considerations, it would seem that language contact phenomena in deaf communities deserve some re-examination. In this paper, I will first present a model for approaching language contact phenomena, and I will then focus on one such phenomenon, contact signing. The model is presented in Figure 1.

We see immediately that before individual phenomena can be discussed, a fundamental distinction must be made. The distinction is between a situation involving contact between two sign languages, and a situation involving a sign language and a spoken language. This distinction is necessary simply because of the difference in modality between sign languages and spoken languages. That is, the basic structural units are of necessity fundamentally very different: morphemes composed of sounds articulated in specific manners and places in the vocal tract, and morphemes composed of parts articulated by the hands, face, and body. This is not to say that spoken language morphemes never include the hands, face, or body, or conversely, that sign language morphemes never include verbal articulation. But the basic structure is different, so the kind of contact phenomena that result from the contact between two sign languages, both in a visual modality, differ from those

that result from the contact between a spoken language and a sign language, one in the oral-aural modality and one in the visual-manual modality. Naturally, the situation is not entirely straightforward, as two sign languages may be in contact, both of which may incorporate outcomes of contact with their respective spoken languages which may then play a role in their own contact. For example, the Italian Sign Language (LIS) sign NEVER is a lexicalized fingerspelled sign related to the spoken Italian word mai. The handshape is I, representative of the last letter of the written Italian word. American ASL users in contact with LIS users may learn and use this sign and use it in conversation with ASL-LIS bilinguals. It is the result of spoken-sign contact and gets used in sign-sign contact situations.

Figure 1: Outcomes of language contact in the deaf community

BETWEEN 2 SIGN LANGUAGES	BETWEEN A SIGN LANGUAGE AND A SPOKEN LANGUAGE	
Lexical borrowing	following spoken language	
Code-switching	<u>criteria literally</u>	<u>unique phenomena</u>
Foreigner talk	code-switching	fingerspelling
Interference	lexical borrowing	fingerspelling / sign combination
Pidgins, creoles, and mixed systems		initialization
		CODA-speak
		TTY conversations
		mouthings
		code-switching
		contact signing

First I will focus on the outcomes of contact between two sign languages. It is important to stress that what I am presenting is a model: while there are anecdotal examples of some of the phenomena I will mention, there is as yet limited empirical research, and as there is more research and as we learn more about deaf communities round the world, the model may change. For example, we are beginning to know more about communities such as the Yucatec Maya one in the Yucatan Peninsula, in which all members of the community, both hearing and deaf, sign (Johnson, 1991). This of course is reminiscent of the Martha's Vineyard island community in the United States, and reports of other such communities are beginning to surface –for example, in Venezuela (Pietrosemoli, personal communication). Not only are these communities in which everyone signs, but in the Yucatec case, neither language involved is written. As Johnson observes (personal communication), the bulk of the language contact research concerns contact between languages at least one of which has a written form, and that is the case in the contact between ASL and English. It is not clear what the outcomes of language contact are, if any, in communities in which everyone signs and in which none of the languages in contact has a written form. However, based on this model, one outcome is lexical borrowing: sign languages borrow lexical items from each other. For example, in ASL, the older signs for many place names such as CHINA, JAPAN, SWEDEN, ITALY, SPAIN, and AFRICA have been replaced by the signs for those places used by signers in those places. Signers can also code-switch: a signer who knows two sign languages could conceivably be using one sign language and momentarily switch to the other sign language. Signers use foreigner talk: that is, a native signer of one sign language signing to another deaf person who is learning that sign language may alter the form of his signing – he may sign slower or larger or choose signs that he thinks may be more easily understood. Signers may also experience interference: a native signer of one sign language may be signing a second sign language and inadvertently incorporate elements of his native sign language in the second language. Finally, while there is very little empirical research on it, it

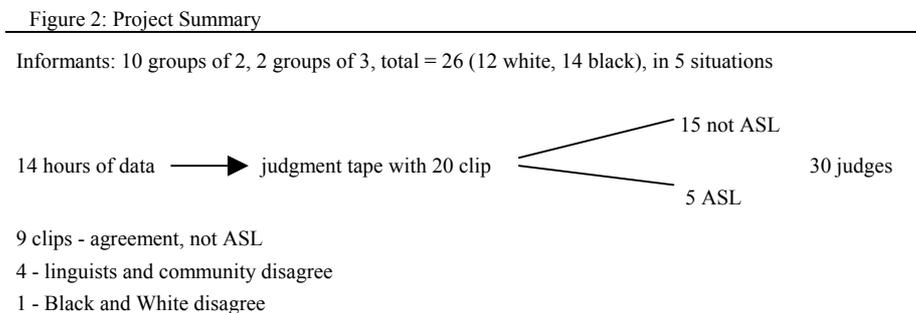
is conceivable that, given the right social conditions, the contact between two or more sign languages could give rise to pidgins, creoles, or mixed systems such as have been attested for spoken languages. The situation for the emergence of a pidgin might be as follows: two adult native signers of two different sign languages are in contact and they both want to learn a third sign language, for reasons of upward social mobility and enhancing their economic situation. Their contact with native users of the third sign language is limited so they end up teaching it to each other. Furthermore, their contact with their respective native languages is restricted if not discontinued altogether. These are the social conditions under which spoken language pidgins often arise, and it is not impossible to imagine such a situation for sign languages. It should be noted that recent work by Supalla and Webb claims that International Sign “has the functional and social characteristics of a pidgin” (1995: 333). However, this claim does not appear to be entirely supported by the description of the phenomenon, and indeed, the authors conclude by stating that their analyses show that International Sign “is more complex than a typical pidgin and indeed is more like that of a full sign language” (p. 347).

I turn now to the contact between a spoken language and a sign language and again you can see a further distinction is necessary. I make a separation between outcomes described by following spoken language criteria literally and unique phenomena. By “following spoken language criteria literally”, I mean, for example, that the person literally stops signing and starts speaking (or vice versa) either across a sentence boundary or within it. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that both of these situations occur. For example, hearing bilinguals may produce ASL sentences or signs with each other (with no deaf people present) in the course of spoken English conversations –I can easily imagine the following English sentence: “And when he told me about it, my mouth went like this: JAW-DROP-OPEN”; where JAW-DROP-OPEN is not a gesture, but a bonafide predicate used in ASL. Deaf and hearing bilinguals may speak English words or sentences with each other or with hearing bilinguals –for example, during a conversation in a restaurant concerning how the bill was going to be paid, a deaf acquaintance switched from ASL to English, mouthed “Have cash”, and then immediately went back to ASL. Likewise, examples of lexical borrowing that follow the criteria established for spoken language borrowing occur. One kind of lexical borrowing in spoken languages is called loan translation, in which the lexical items of one language are translated into another language and used with the same meaning – examples include the Italian, French and Spanish words for the English word “skyscraper”: *grattacielo*, *gratteciel*, and *rascacielos*, respectively. There are numerous examples of this in ASL: the signs BOY FRIEND, GIRL FRIEND, HOME WORK, and HOME SICK are loan translations of English words. Loan translations also occur in English, when hearing bilinguals form spoken English morphemes from the mouth configuration that is part of an ASL sign. For example, the mouth configuration that is part of the classifier predicate meaning LARGE PILE OF PAPERS or THICK BOOK –a mouth configuration having an adverbial meaning of LARGE QUANTITY or THICK ENTITY– can be glossed as “cha”, phonetically [ča]. Hearing bilingual students have been heard to say, in English: “I have cha homework”.

I turn now to the unique phenomena that result from the contact between a spoken language and a sign language. One such phenomenon is fingerspelling, or what many people recognize as the manual alphabet. It can be said that were there no contact between the written form of the spoken language and the sign language, there would be no fingerspelling. But it is a unique phenomenon. It has been described as lexical borrowing by some

researchers (Battison, 1978), but I take the position that it is not best characterized as borrowing. Lexical borrowing typically means a relationship between the phonologies of two languages, be they spoken or signed, and I have already provided some examples of lexical borrowing between sign languages. But fingerspelling is not a relationship between two phonologies; it is a relationship between the writing system of a spoken language and the phonology of a sign language. The forms used belong to the phonology of the sign language. Hence, it is a unique event resulting from contact. Fingerspelling may be “full”, i.e. with the complete realization of each sign corresponding to a written letter (usually represented by dashes, e.g. M-A-R-Y), or it may have become lexicalized. In the latter case, reduction is seen usually in handshapes and movements, as separate signs for letters lexicalize to become essentially a single sign. There are many examples of this in ASL and it is typically marked by the # symbol. Thus, the full fingerspelling of the English word B-A-N-K is reduced to two handshapes, B and K, with a rapid down-and-up movement between the two, #BANK. In addition, we see examples of sign-fingerspelling combinations, such as the ASL sign LIFE#STYLE, and we are becoming aware of the kind of fingerspelling produced by Deaf people in contact with other kinds of writing systems such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Hebrew. Related to this is some very interesting recent work by Jean Ann (1998) on character signs in Taiwan Sign Language, that is, where the sign language manually represents written Chinese characters. Another phenomenon is initialization, whereby the handshape of a sign is the fingerspelled handshape corresponding to a written letter of the spoken language. For example, the handshapes of the signs ASSOCIATION, TEAM, ORGANIZATION, GROUP, and SOCIETY in ASL are respectively A, T, O, G, and S. They share the same movement and location and differ only in the handshape. Another unique phenomenon is mouthing, distinct from speaking the spoken language. Davis (1989) presents a model for a continuum of mouthing, ranging from full mouthing of spoken words to lexicalized mouthing as in the ASL signs FINISH and HAVE, whose mouth configurations clearly derive from English but have become part of the ASL sign. Mouthing is distinct from the mouth configurations that accompany some ASL signs and have no connection to the spoken word, as in the ASL sign PAH or NOT-YET. Yet another unique phenomenon is what has been described as Coda-speak. (Jacobs, 1992) CODA is the acronym often used in the United States to identify the hearing children of deaf adults, individuals who may have ASL as their native language. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Coda-speak consists of spoken English words produced with ASL syntactic structure, what might be called “spoken ASL”. It has not yet been described, so we cannot say what its morphological and prosodic features might be but it probably also occurs with the hearing children of deaf people in other countries and is clearly a contact outcome unique to spoken language-sign language bilinguals. Finally, signers may code-switch between ASL and one of the codes invented for manually representing English or other spoken languages. I distinguish this from code-switching between two sign languages because the manual code is based on the structure of a spoken language.

I turn finally to a unique phenomenon to which my deaf colleague Clayton Valli and I have devoted a fair amount of research time. It is what was once labeled Pidgin Sign English (PSE) in the United States and is now referred to as contact signing. Time will only allow me to very briefly summarize our project on contact signing but our findings have been published. Figure 2 summarizes the project.



We set up an interview situation designed to elicit contact signing; we interviewed 10 groups of two signers and 2 groups of 3, for a total of 26 informants (12 white and 14 black, all ASL users). I will not elaborate on what the signers did in the 5 situations but there was a wide range of behaviour –some signed ASL in all situations, some never signed ASL (even though they were native signers) and some differed their use apparently depending on who the interviewer was. We were able to elicit good examples of what we now call contact signing and of what at the time we referred to as “not ASL” (for a complete description of the project, see Lucas & Valli, 1992). We then made a judgment tape from our data tapes consisting of 20 clips, 5 of which were clearly ASL and 15 of which were not ASL; 30 judges –all deaf, members of the deaf community– judged the clips and based on their judgments, we isolated 9 clips for which there was a high degree of agreement that they were not ASL, and 5 whose structure is not ASL but for which there was a lot of disagreement in the judgments.

Figure 3: Comparison of linguistic features among various systems

Features	Spoken English	ASL	Signed English	Contact Signing	English-based Spoken Language Pidgins
Lexical form	English	ASL	ASL, ASL-like signs, non-ASL spoken English	ASL and ASL-like signs, English whispering and mouthing, single spoken words	English, some substrate some idiosyncratic
Lexical function and meaning	English	ASL	English	ASL, idiosyncratic English	English and idiosyncratic
Morphology	English	ASL	Reduced English and ASL, signed representation of bound morphemes	Reduced ASL and English, some signs for English morphemes, some ASL inflected verbs and nonmanual signals	Reduced English
Syntax	English	ASL	Reduced English	Reduced English, some idiosyncratic constructions, ASL use of space, eyegaze, pronouns, determiners, discourse markers	Basically SVO, reduced use of pronouns and prepositions, embedding rare

Figure 3 provides a comparison of the features of different systems, including contact signing. We can see from this that contact signing differs from Signed English, ASL, and from spoken language pidgins. What I want to focus on briefly is the evidence for

contact signing as a third system which combines elements of English and ASL in a unique way. You will recall that there were 5 clips on the judgment tape which cannot be said to have ASL syntactic structure and which have many features of English such as embedded constructions with that and constructions with prepositions but which many judges consistently judged as ASL. Our question, of course, was why? Upon closer examination, we found that while these clips did indeed have many English features, they also shared several ASL syntactic features that may account for the judgment of these clips as ASL. These features include the establishment of a topic in space, the use of eye gaze to refer to the established topic, the use of body shifting both in conjunction with an established topic and for role shifting, and the use of ASL pronouns and determiners. In several instances, the signer established two separate topics, one on the right and one on the left (a very common device in sign language discourse) for example, mainstream programs and residential schools, black signers and white signers –and then consistently referred to those points by signing in the same place or directing eye gaze or body to those points. The structure of the sentences used to discuss those referents cannot be said to be ASL, as it has many English features. But, the occurrence of these ASL features probably explains the judgments of these clips as ASL, even though their overall structure is not ASL. The structure of all of the clips is unique in part because of this use of both ASL and English features; it is also unique because the ASL feature frequently occur simultaneously with English mouthing without voice so that what we see is a kind of code-mixing that has not been described for spoken languages; it is also unique for the ASL and English features that do not occur: we do not see bound English morphemes such as third person singular -s, plural -s, possessive -s, past tense -ed, and we do not see ASL syntactic constructions such as topicalization and relativization. But it does seem to be a third system and not the predominantly English-based system we initially thought it was. Third systems have been described for spoken languages (see for example Romaine, 1995; Whinnom, 1971; Grosjean, 1992), but what we see seems to be a unique outcome of the contact between a spoken language and a sign language. And I refer here to the paper given at SIB'97 by Peter Auer (2000): it is clearly not possible or appropriate in this case to try and pick a “base language”.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, what I have presented is a model for language contact phenomena in Deaf communities and sign languages around the world and their contact with spoken and written languages. For example, to what extent are these phenomena present in Spanish Sign Language and are there phenomena that occur that are not listed in the model? Very specifically, is there a manual representation of tilde and accents? Do the hearing children of Deaf people in Spain produce CODA-speak? What about contact between users of Spanish Sign Language and Portuguese Sign Language or French Sign Language –that is, what can we learn about the contact between two sign languages and not just about contact between sign languages and spoken languages? Let me conclude by simply saying that there is a lot of work to be done.

Bibliographical references

- Ann, J. (1998). “Contact between a sign language and a written language: Character signs in Taiwan Sign Language”. In C. Lucas (ed.). *Pinky Extension and Eye Gaze: Language Use in Deaf Communities*. Washington (DC): Gallaudet University Press.
- Auer, P. (2000). “Why should we and how can we determine the ‘base language’ of a bilingual conversation?”. *Estudios Sociolingüísticos* 1(1), 129-52

- Battison, R. (1978). *Lexical Borrowing in American Sign Language*. Silver Spring (MD): Linstok Press.
- Davis, J. (1989). "Distinguishing language contact phenomena in ASL interpretation". In C. Lucas (ed.). *The Sociolinguistics of the Deaf Community*. San Diego: Academic Press, 85-102.
- Jacobs, S. (1992). "Coda talk column". *Coda Connection* 9(1).
- Johnson, R.E. (1991). "Sign language, culture and community in a traditional Yucatec Maya village". *Sign Language Studies* 73, 461-78.
- Lucas, C. & C. Valli (1992). *Language Contact in the American Deaf Community*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Romaine, S. (1995²). *Bilingualism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Supalla, T. & R. Webb (1995). "The grammar of International Sign: A new look at Pidgin languages". In K. Emmorey & J. Reilly (eds.). *Language, Gesture, and Space*. Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Whinnom, K. (1971). "Linguistic hybridization and the 'special case' of pidgins and creoles". In D. Hymes (ed.). *Pidginization and Creolization of Language*. London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 91-115.
- Woodward, J. (1973). "Some characteristics of Pidgin Sign English". *Sign Language Studies* 3, 39-46.
- Woodward, J. & H. Markowicz (1975). Some handy new ideas on pidgins and creoles: Pidgin sign languages. Paper presented at *Conference on Pidgin and Creole Languages*. Honolulu, Hawaii.