

Digiti lingua: a celebration of British Sign Language and Deaf Culture

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Structure of this talk

- Introduction to BSL: its history and social context
- Historical sources
- What kind of language is BSL?
- Change in BSL
- BSL in the future



Introduction to BSL: its history and social context



Some myths about sign language

- There is one universal sign language
- Sign language consists of iconic gestures
- Sign languages were invented by hearing people to help deaf people
- Sign languages have no grammar
- BSL is just English on the hands



Truths about sign language

- There are many different sign languages in the world
- Sign languages are just as conventionalised as spoken languages
- Sign languages are natural languages, the creation of deaf communities
- Sign languages have their own complex grammars



BSL – language of the British Deaf community

- An estimated 50,000-70,000 sign language people
- Forms a single language group with Australian and New Zealand sign languages
- Unrelated to American Sign Language or Irish Sign Language



Social context of BSL

- A minority language used by a community with historically low status
- Non-traditional transmission patterns
- Extensive regional lexical variation
- A bilingual community, but with variable access to the language of the majority
- Has experienced active attempts at suppression over many centuries



Home sign

- Gestural communication systems developed during communication between deaf children and hearing adults
- Unlike sign languages, home sign
 - does not pass from generation to generation
 - is not shared by one large group
 - is not the same over a community of signers
- However, home signs are often the starting point for new sign languages that develop when deaf people come together



Early references to signing in Britain

- Princess Joanna of Scotland (1426-1486)
“communicated with her younger sister by signs”
- 1575 – record of a signed wedding service
 - Thomas Tilsye and Ursula Russel were married: and because the sayde Thomas was and is naturally deafe and also dumbe, so that the order of the forme of mariage used usually amongst others which can heare and speake could not for his parte be observed ... the sayde Thomas, for the expression of his minde instead of words, of his own accorde used these signs...



Samuel Pepys's account of the great fire of London in 1666 refers to signing:

By and by comes news that the fire has slackened; so then we were a little cheered up again, and to supper, and pretty merry. But, above all, there comes in the dumb boy that I knew in Oliver's time, who is mightily acquainted here, and with Downing; and he made strange signs of the fire, and how the King was abroad, and many things they understood, but I could not, which I wondering at, and discoursing with Downing about it, "Why," says he, "it is only a little use, and you will understand him, and make him understand you with as much ease as may be." (entry for November 9, 1666; <http://www.pepys.info/1666/1666nov.html>)

Deaf communities arise from home signers



EDWARD BONE, of Ladock in this county, was servant to Mr. Courtney therein. He was deaf from his cradle, and consequently dumb (Nature cannot give out where it hath not received) ; yet could learn, and express to his master, any news that was stirring in the country; There was one Kempe, not living far off, defected accordingly, on whose meetings there were such embracements, such strange, often, and earnest tokenings, and such hearty laughters, and other passionate gestures, that their want of a tongue seemed rather an hindrance to others conceiving them, than to their conceiving one another.

Richard Carew, 1602



17th century

- What though you cannot express your minds in those verball contrivances of man's invention; yet you want not speeche; who have your whole body for a tongue (Bulwer: *Philocophus*, 1648, the first book on sign language in Britain, dedicated to a deaf baronet and his brother)
- The deaf man has no teacher at all and though necessity may put him upon ... using signs, yet those have no affinity to the language by which they that are about him do converse among themselves. (Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus*, 1661)

Information from Old Bailey records: William Bartlett, 1786



- Judge: Now how is it that you woud. communicate the question you woud. ask to your brother are they signs that you make or are they expressive of any particular words or are they expressive of letters or Syllables?
- Interpreter (sister) Not letters or Syllables but by motion of words.
- Judge: If the Man spoke an unknown language I do not know that there is any objection to that if the language can be Interpreted to the Satisfaction of the Jury



Descriptive information about BSL

- Drawings
- Descriptions of sign forms in English
- Descriptions of BSL grammar
- Fingerspelling charts
- Photographs, film and video



Description in Leicester parish register of William Tilsye's signs (1575)

First he embraced her with his armes, and took her by the hande, putt a ring upon her finger and layde his hande upon her harte, and held his handes towardes heaven; and to show his continuance to dwell with her to his lyves ende he did it by closing of his eyes with his handes and digginge out of the earthe with his foote, and pulling as though he would ring a bell with divers other signs approved

Descriptions of signs in Bulwer's *Chirologia* (1644)



Gesture	Meaning
Throw the hands up to heaven	Weeping
Clap right fist in left palm	Chide, insult
Put forth right hand spread	Fee, heart, bounty
Hold up thumb	Assent
Extend little finger from fist	Contempt
Finger in the eye	Crying
Interlock fingers	Sluggish



Descriptions of BSL grammar



Descriptions of BSL grammar

Father our, heaven in, name thy hallowed.
Kingdom thy come – will thy done – earth
on – heaven in – same. Bread give us daily
– trespasses our forgive us – they trespass
against us, forgive - same. Temptation lead
not – but evil deliver from. Kingdom –
power – glory thine forever.

(Mrs. Hippiisley Tuckfield 1839)



Edward Tylor (1874)

So far as I can learn, few or none of the fictitious grammatical signs will bear even the short journey from the schoolroom to the playground, where there is no loner any verb 'to be', where the abstract conjunctions are unknown and where mere position, quality and action may serve to describe substantive and adjective alike.



The natural order of sign language is 1. Object; 2. Subject; 3. Action; ... 'door key open' to express 'the key opens the door' ... When Mr Hebden expressed in gestures 'I found a pipe on the road' the order of the signs was written down as 'road pipe I-find' ...



Illustrations of signs drawings and photographs



Bulwer, 1644

DICTIONARY OF D. & D. SIGNS.

No. 3.

 56. BUT	 57. BUTTER	 58. BUY.	 59. CAKE.
 60. C.	 61. CALL	 62. CAN	 63. CARE.
 64. CAT.	 65. CHOOSE.	 66. CHURCH.	 67. CONFESS.
 68. COOK.	 69. D.	 70. DAILY.	 71. DAUGHTER.
 72. DAY DAWN	 73. DEATH.	 74. DEPTH.	 75. DEVIL.
 76. DIFFICULT	 77. DISLIKE	 78. DISTANT.	 79. DO-WORK.

EXPLANATION OF SIGNS.—56. R. forefinger makes a comma in the air. 57. Forefinger first touches R. neck, the sign for kill, and then imitates sharpening on a steel. 58. R. thumb down L. palm as indicated. 59. R. hand as drawn, twice on back of L. hand. 62. Thumb and forefinger, R. hand, touch forehead, and as moved away are brought together. 63. Thumbs and forefingers apart at arm's length towards body as drawn. 64. Thumbs and forefingers closed touch each side of mouth and pulled away forwards sharply in direction of cat's whiskers. 65. R. thumb and forefinger pulled upwards as from a basket. 66. Imitates church bell pulling. 67. One hand uses sign for say, i.e. forefinger from lips moved forwards, other hand points to self. 68. Imitates roasting jack, one finger down, other forefinger up revolving. 70. Hand moved from side of face forwards two or three times. 71. Letter D twice. 72. Two fingers each hand moved out and upwards. 73. Hands moved as arrows and wrists twisted. 76. R. thumb presses L. palm. 78. Point away. 79. Strike L. wrist with side of R. palm.





The deaf and dumb can converse in signs as quickly and clearly as hearing people can talk.

One of many leaflets with illustrations of signs by Ash



ENTERED AT STATIONERS HALL

PICTORIAL SIGNS of the Silent Language.

SET 1.

EXPLANATION.

- Blood**—Place finger on the lower lip, and slightly turn the lip outward to show the inside.
- Woman**—Play the forefinger over the lips.
- Sister**—Play the half-closed forefinger on the nose, up and down, as can be seen in the drawing.
- Eat**—Imitate bringing anything to the mouth, and eating it.
- Drink**—Close right fist and bring the thumb to the lips, as seen in the drawing.
- Nice**—Pass the thumb over the lips and "smack" them.
- Teach**—Imitate taking something from your forehead, and throwing it into another person's forehead, as drawing directs.
- See—Look**—Hold finger to the eye and point to any object.
- Understand**—Place right forefinger on forehead, and then hold up the right thumb.
- Spirit**—Imitate drawing out the breath with right hand, and move up a bit, as in drawing.
- Darkness**—Hold the hands as in drawing, then bring them over the face crosswise, as in the dotted position.
- Light**—Place hands crosswise over face, then move them out to dotted position, as in drawing.

Part of a series of illustrations of signs published in the *British Deaf and Dumb Times*



AS USED IN GREAT BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA.

Illustration from an Ash leaflet



With some scraps of talk about the Great and Good, their Alphabet, and a few Ticks.

ROYALTY AND THE DEAF.

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"Royal Condescension" (1874)

Queen Victoria visiting a deaf woman.
From an Ash leaflet



Introduction to the linguistics of BSL



Characteristics of BSL

- Modality-specific features: BSL reflects options available to visual spatial languages
 - vocabulary is visually motivated
 - grammar exploits the possibility of placing and moving signs through space
 - multiple articulators are used
- Despite these differences BSL is processed by the brain in the same areas as spoken language

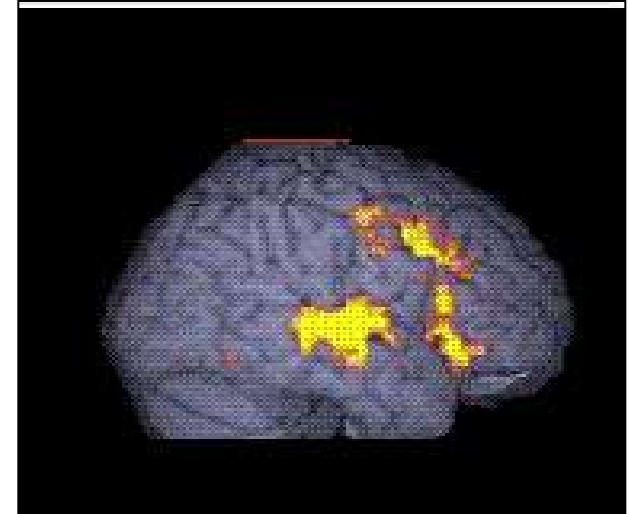
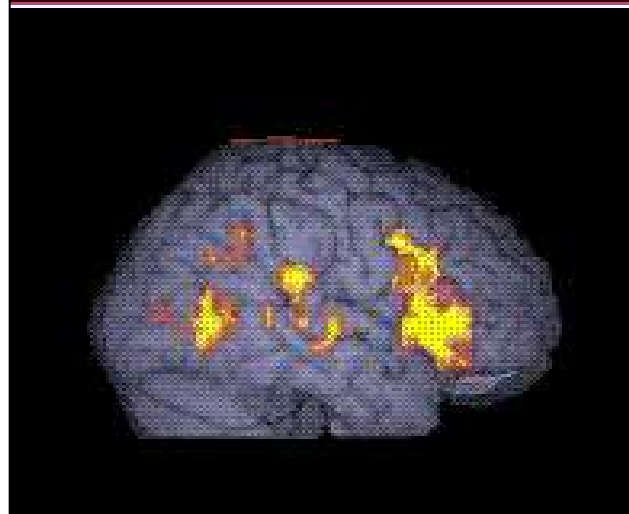
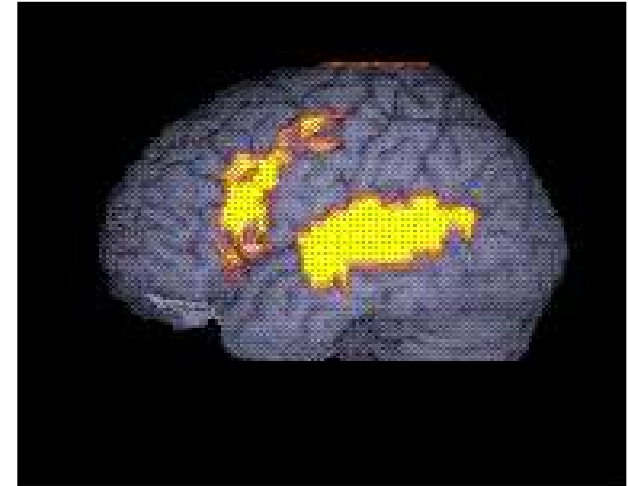
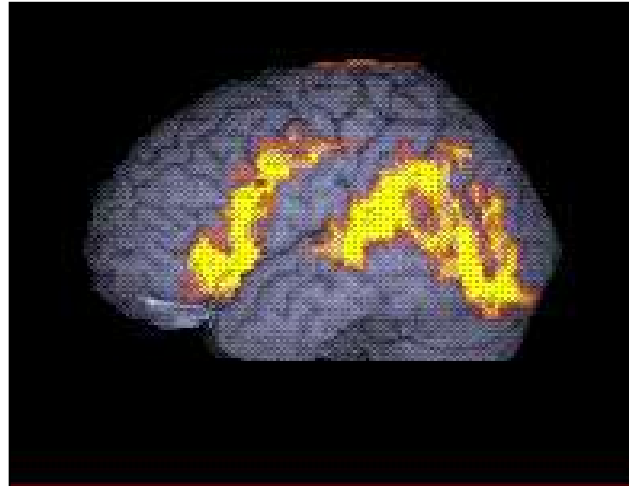
Sign language and the brain



BSL - Deaf native signers

English – hearing native speakers

Audio-visual
English



Brain, 2002



Iconicity or Visual Motivation

The form of many signs is related to their meaning, but not all signs



TREE



SISTER



An example of BSL grammar



TABLE



BOOK



PEN



LONG-THIN-OBJ-cl

FLAT-OBJ-cl _____

The book is next to the pen on the table



Change in BSL



How do new signs get into the language?

- New coinages
- compounding
- Borrowing from other sign languages
- Borrowing from spoken languages
 - Loan translations
 - Loans via fingerspelling

Some compounds in BSL



THINK + TRUE	BELIEVE
THINK + RULE	DECIDE
MIND + HOLD	REMEMBER
SAY + HOLD	PROMISE
THINK + MIX	CONFUSE
TELL + AGAIN	REPEAT
RED + FLOW	BLOOD
MOTHER + FATHER	PARENTS
FACE + GOOD	HANDSOME
SAY + WIPE	FORGIVE
SEE + PERHAPS	CHECK
MAN + WOMAN	PEOPLE
HEAD + HURT	HEADACHE



Borrowing from other sign languages

- Names of countries and cities, e.g. AMERICA, ITALY, NEW YORK,
- Specialist terminology, e.g. CLASSIFIER, LINGUISTICS

(ASL) VEHICLE-cl → (BSL) CLASSIFIER



Borrowing from spoken languages

- Addition of mouthings for disambiguation: FINLAND/METAL
- Loans via mouthing: BRISTOL, LEICESTER
- Loan translations: GREEN + LAND, KEY ISSUE



These loans have a long history





New sign creation through visual iconicity

- New technology: FAX, MOBILE-PHONE, SATELLITE-DISH
- New technology sometimes results in loss of older forms: FILM, CAMERA, TELEPHONE



That's what's happened so far.

What does the future hold?

- Is BSL an endangered language?
- What is the likely influence of English within a bilingual Deaf community?
- What is the likely influence of other sign languages on BSL?
- Will Deaf people disappear?
- Will there be any linguists doing sign language research?

Thank you

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