

Sign Languages in a Globalised World

Assoc Professor Adam Schembri

Director, Centre for Research on Language Diversity

La Trobe University

Okay, so I'm here to talk about sign languages in a globalised world, and I guess really the aim of my talk today is to address some myths and misunderstandings around sign languages, but also to talk about the fact that in the global environment there are a number of pressures that are making sign languages increasingly endangered. I want to talk about the response to that endangerment which is new projects on sign language documentation, and that's basically what I hope to cover today.

Now, there are a number of myths and misunderstandings around sign languages. I don't have time to talk about them all today, but certainly the main one that comes into my title relates to the fact that often it comes as a surprise to most people who don't know very much about sign languages, that they aren't in fact universal. People tend to think that there is a universal sign language that's used by people all around the world. Now, it's very interesting because I think that idea ... often you tell people, you know, you might be in the back of a cab going somewhere and a cab driver will ask "What do you do?" and I say, "Okay, I'm a linguist. I work on sign languages." "Oh, okay. And what do you do?" and I say, "I work mostly on Australian Sign Language and British Sign Language." People say, what, there's an Australian Sign Language?! You mean, it isn't universal? No, it's not universal. And then people's reactions are often something like, oh dear, oh dear, that was badly organised. It's bad news for deaf people. They can't even talk to each other. And I think people tend to think that sign languages are universal because they tend to link it to another myth about sign languages which was that some very enterprising and generous and helpful hearing individual came along at some point in the past and created these sign systems so that deaf people could communicate with each other. This is kind of based on the idea that well, we know for example that the Frenchman Louis Braille actually invented Braille as a tactile system for representing written languages to assist literacy development amongst blind people, and people think there's an analogy with sign languages. In fact, sign languages were created by deaf people when no-one really was paying any attention. Right under the noses of hearing people in fact, to the extent that often hearing people weren't very aware that this is what was happening right down their street, perhaps, in a village nearby, or in many cases, what deaf people were doing amongst each other while we were busy trying to teach them English or a spoken language or to read and write.

So I won't discuss those today, but I will talk about Australian Sign Language. Australian Sign Language is called Auslan. It's been a lot in the media lately because you may have heard that some of the outcome of the Victorian government cuts to TAFE colleges has negatively impacted on the only way that sign language interpreters are currently trained. So you may have seen the word *Auslan* in the media lately. It's a blend. It shouldn't be written with capital letters. It's a blend of the first few letters in the phrase Australian Sign Language. Australian Sign Language or Auslan is unique to Australia. Like Australian English, it was brought to this country by Europeans, mostly British people, as far as we can tell in the early 19th century, but it's since developed into a unique form of sign language but it's very closely related to New Zealand Sign Language and British Sign Language. We don't know how many people use

Auslan. In the last census, about 9,000 people put down that they use Auslan in the home. We know that a lot of deaf people use Auslan, not with their hearing families, for example. They may use English in the home and they use Auslan outside of the home. We don't really know what the number of signing deaf people is.

The term *Auslan* was coined by my colleague Trevor Johnston, who is a Professor in Linguistics at Macquarie University, and as I said, as far as we know, the sign language was brought here by deaf immigrants. There's been some recent research, fantastic research. The Old Bailey records have recently gone online in the UK, so records of court cases through the 18th and 19th centuries in the UK has recently gone online, and very enterprising researchers in the UK have been busy looking through those records to find cases of where interpreters were used in the courtroom for deaf people accused of crimes. And what they've been able to do is they've contacted researchers in Australia and said, okay, we have these names as people who were sentenced for transportation to Australia. Can you see if they turned up in Australia? And in fact, this research is ongoing, it's very new. There are records actually that some of these two convicts turned up in Sydney – one in 1819, another in 1823 – and we do know that they were deaf sign language users. They probably used an older form of British Sign Language, and they ended up here in Australia. The first immigrant free settler was a Scotsman by the name of John Carmichael – he arrived in Sydney in 1825. We know from records in the UK that he loved to engage in gambling, so we don't really know why he left the UK as a free settler to come to the other side of the world, but we suspect that there may be something to do with his fondness for gambling that drove him to the other side of the world at the time.

Now, you may have heard of American Sign Language. Auslan is not related – it's part of the same sign language family as British and New Zealand sign languages, but it's not related to American Sign Language. In fact American Sign Language and the sign language used in Australia are mutually unintelligible. They have different histories. I don't have time to go into them today but if you want to ask later, by all means do. So these are sign languages, just a handful of the sign languages that are used around the world. We don't actually know how many sign languages there are. *Ethnologue*, which is a reference work that catalogues something like 6,909 known languages around the world, does include about 130 deaf sign languages, but we know that that's incomplete because new sign languages are being discovered all of the time.

There are many different types of sign languages. We heard today about the fact that many Aboriginal communities traditionally use a type of sign language. These are what's known as *alternate sign languages*, so they're used predominantly by hearing people in certain contexts in which spoken language is taboo or banned. One of the best-documented sign languages of this type is Warlpiri sign language which, like Warumungu sign language, is used in particular contexts, cultural contexts such as mourning etc.

But there are lots of other sign languages and in particular I work on deaf community sign languages, and they can be grouped into three kind of major categories. What we would call a macro community sign language. Yes, it's amazing to think that Auslan, used by 9,000 people in Australia, falls into that category of a macro community sign language, so a large community sign language. There are a number

of those across the world. We tend to use when referring to sign languages, we tend to use the national language acronym to refer to a particular sign language, so Auslan is the word that's used in Australia, British Sign Language, American Sign Language. German Sign Language is called DGS, Deutsche Gebärdensprache, German Sign Language in the language. LIS is Italian Sign Language, LSF is French Sign Language, langue des signes française, so rather than ... you can imagine that because a lot of countries in English have the same initial, it's better to use the local kind of acronym so that's the big kind of sign languages, the macro community sign languages that we have around the world. They don't always follow national boundaries and in fact it's quite debatable whether British Sign Language consists of a single sign language, or maybe more than one. In particular the variety used in Northern Ireland is quite distinct from other sign language varieties of British Sign Language, used on the island of Great Britain, in particular it's kind of mutually unintelligible with these varieties. So even though those sign languages are called by those names, it's not clear yet, because we don't have enough information, whether they do actually represent single languages.

Then there are micro community sign languages that have come to be discovered and researched very recently. Some of these have been in the media lately. One of them that's not far from here is Kata Kolok Sign Language. This is a sign language used in a village in northern Bali. Many of these sign languages represent villages which, due to traditions of intermarriage within the village, disproportionate numbers of deaf people have been born into that community. So in the case of Benkala, the village in northern Bali where Kata Kolok is used, that's a village of about two thousand people. Traditionally there's been a lot of intermarriage in that community and so the proportion of deaf people in that community is much higher than you would get in the Australian population so it's about one in forty, one in fifty. There are about fifty deaf people in that community, so what that means is that every extended family has a deaf community member so pretty much everyone in that community can use the local sign language to a certain extent. So as far as we can tell, medical records suggest that the recessive gene in that community has been around for at least seven generations and that this has led to the emergence of a local sign language in that village community in northern Bali. Not only that, but the deafness is considered just a normal variation of what it means to be human. In fact the village people there worship a deaf god that brings the deaf children into the village. The deaf people in the village have certain roles. The deaf are the only ones that can bury the dead in the village. They have certain roles. So it's so much part of the culture in that village that it's considered just a normal variety of being human.

So these are these fascinating micro community sign languages. We also have some emerging sign languages in countries like Nicaragua, where we've been able to document the emergence of a sign language in the last few decades.

We also have contact sign languages. Because we have sign languages like Auslan existing in an English-speaking community and because there's no written form of Auslan, most deaf people acquire literacy in English and also learn and are instructed in English, so there's a lot of contact with English and there are contact varieties of Auslan that reflect aspects of English grammar. But there haven't been attempts – there's no standard form of many of these sign languages around the world, but there have been interventions by governments, and for example, by educators, in the place of creating a standardised

form of sign languages, what you've got instead is something called artificial sign systems, which have been created by teachers to represent in sign form, the spoken language of that community. So, Auslan and English have quite different grammars, you can see here at the bottom of the slide, the way you might say in Auslan "this is the book that I gave him" and you can see that the word order, "this book me finish I give to him". The word order is quite different to what you'd find in English and you can also see that there are forms of sign that don't match up with English, so for example, this sign at the end, which looks like this ... okay ... literally means, "I give to some third person", some other person. So that really means, I gave, or I give to someone else. We can see that the sign meaning "finish" is a sign that is used to show that something is completed at the time of signing. If we compare this to the Signed English system that was created in the 1970s ... one of the reasons sign languages are endangered is because they haven't been recognised as languages for most of the 20th and 19th century, in fact, so deaf education began in Europe in the late 18th century – the first schools for deaf children were simultaneously established in France and in Scotland, in 1760. In those days, sign language was accepted as the means of instruction, to teach deaf children. But in the 19th century, deaf education became kind of the monster that ate itself. Due to the success of sign language instruction, creating educated and literate deaf people, people began to move away from using sign languages in deaf education in the belief that it was clear that deaf people could learn language, so therefore we should teach them English rather than sign language. So in the late 19th century began a movement called "oralism" which banned sign languages completely in deaf education. That lasted through most of the 20th century until the literacy rates of deaf people became so much lower than the rest of the community that people began to recognise that maybe there was a role for sign language again in deaf education, but recognising that sign languages have a different grammar and vocab from English meant that teachers created artificial sign systems to represent English in sign form. So you can see here at the top, this is Australasian Signed English which was a system created by teachers in the 1970s to represent English. So there was no attempt to standardise Auslan which has actually a lot of regional variations. You can spot, when you are a fluent Auslan signer, you can spot whether a signer is from Melbourne or Sydney, or even Adelaide, after a bit of interaction with them, because there are certain signs that are used in each part of the country that are quite different. There's never been an attempt to standardise Auslan but instead all the effort was placed in creating a standardised form of Signed English that could be used in deaf education.

This was abandoned from the 1990s, after about twenty to thirty years in deaf education. It was completely abandoned because it was found to be actually quite impossible to produce. The reason for this is, it takes about twice as long to produce a sign as to produce a spoken word. So if you think about signs, they involve large muscle groups and large joints and moving parts, moving bones, in the body. So all of this can be involved in the signed message. As you can see, if you look at the interpreter, working next to me now, you'll see that they use a very large part of their body as part of the signed message. Sorry to put you on the spot, Paul.

Whereas if we speak, okay, we use a very small part of the body, and actually we can speak at a faster rate than we can sign. Now, what this means is that natural sign languages have solved this problem by incorporating more information into a single sign. So if you look across different sign languages across

the world that have emerged naturally in deaf communities, you will see that they use very similar strategies, they combine for example, facial expressions with signs simultaneously that create a multimodal message in a single sign. So these are the strategies that sign languages have naturally evolved. There was a study in 1972 that pointed this fact out, but unfortunately it was published in a psychology journal and was not known to the educators at the time, who created the Signed English system. So actually, studies have shown that it's impossible to keep pace with spoken English if you want to sign every single word that you speak, simultaneously.

So eventually this system was abandoned. But we are getting sign languages endangered in other ways, not just through the creation of artificial sign systems, although it's very unfortunate that the experience in Australia has spread actually to other parts of the world. So for example, within Indonesia, there are a number of sign languages. We don't actually know how many. We know that there are different sign languages used on the island of Java. There are different sign languages used in different parts of Indonesia. I've talked about Kata Kolok, which is unique to Bali, but based on the Australian experience, a signed Indonesian system has been created by the Indonesian government, called SIBI, Sistem Isyarat Bahasa Indonesia. So literally signed system for Indonesian. And this is being used, teachers are being trained to use this system, interpreters are being trained to use this system. If you ever caught Garuda or Indonesian Airlines, you often see a sign language interpreter appear on the screen. They are using SIBI, not any of the indigenous Indonesian sign languages, and of course this is leading to all sorts of problems, because interpreters and teachers of the deaf cannot actually communicate with the deaf people in their local communities, where natural sign languages have emerged, again without being properly studied or documented.

Not only that, but there's been a mistaken assumption in many parts of the world that sign languages don't exist in particular countries, so in particular Christian missionaries have taken American Sign Language into many, many parts of the world. Unfortunately this has often endangered indigenous sign languages that weren't recognised. One of the sign languages that you saw on my list there was Adamarobe Sign Language, which is an indigenous sign language in a village in Ghana. Like many parts of Africa, unfortunately American Sign Language has been introduced by educators and is being used in the schools for deaf children there, and it's endangering the local sign languages, many of which are disappearing before they've been properly documented. So we're getting many sources of endangerment. Another one ... I'll just end here ... based on an ideology that the Arab world speak a common language, and are united by common cultural ties, again, we've seen governments in the Arab world create a Unified Arab Sign Language, again we're seeing the same thing happening, teachers are being trained to use this, interpreters are being trained to use this, even though we know there are numerous undocumented, under-described sign languages in the Arab world, including another village language, Al-Sayyid Bedouin sign language from the Negev desert in Israel, again another one of these micro-community sign languages.

So sign languages are being endangered all around the world and one of the responses to this has been work that myself and other colleagues are undertaking, to try and document sign languages. Now, we don't have writing systems for sign languages. A number have been proposed, but ... and here is one for example in this slide, the Sutton Signwriting System. It says there that's an American Sign Language and

it's talking about the fact that other countries have other sign languages, so you can see here the signs for Austria, Italy, Nicaragua, here is the sign for Australia, so these are written symbols in Sutton Signwriting that represent signs for different countries. This has been created and it is actually being used in some bilingual schools for deaf children in some parts of the world but in most deaf communities around the world, there's a much greater pressure from the deaf community not to create written scripts for the sign language, but to teach literacy in the spoken language, the written language of the surrounding community, because of course that gives access to education, etc. So there's very little demand, but there are action groups across different parts of the world that are using Sutton Signwriting to record sign languages. This system was developed – it's very interesting – it was developed as the modification of Labanotation, which is a system for notating dance, used by choreographers. But it hasn't really caught on and I'm pleased to say that in a sense, we've left that behind because we now have new technologies, digital video, video annotation technologies, which have leapfrogged writing systems and what we're getting now is a great uptake of the use of digital video to document sign languages.

I'm a mono-lingual Macintosh user and I'm not sure how to go into Internet Explorer from the presentation so I might leave it for question time but I was going to show you some work we've been doing using this technology to document British Sign Language in Australian Sign Language, using video technology, but I might save that for questions and once I can work out how to move into that presentation. But thank you for your attention.