

Changes to Regional Variations in BSL

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All languages are subject to change, often due to the effects of time and new concepts (such as technology and media) and interactions between language groups. When new words are developed in English they may be added to the lexicon but old words are not necessarily abandoned. Words may take on new meanings and some dialect words do disappear but the history of the language is largely preserved in dictionary format. However, British Sign Language has a different fate, partly because it does not have a written form. Our language is preserved and developed almost totally through everyday use.

Like spoken languages, sign languages have regional differences. Many years ago, speech used on radio or television was primarily 'received pronunciation' and regional accents were not generally considered suitable for broadcast. New diversity policies are now attempting to change this and regional accents

are more frequently represented by radio and TV presenters. However, BSL regional variation does not receive the same exposure and status and may decrease or be lost as a result. Television has had a significant impact on the signs that people are exposed to and use. Many people adopt signs that they see on TV and may abandon their own local signs. Could this lead, in time, to a change in the amount of variation in BSL, which may in turn reduce, not enrich our language?

Examples of changes

'YESTERDAY'



fig.1

Many people believe that signs that express past time should move backwards. This belief is based on research done in Scotland in 1981 (Brennan; 1983 pp. 10-31). However, in some regions e.g. Liverpool and the South-East, signs like 'YESTERDAY' move forwards from the side of the face (fig.1). Incomplete knowledge of current research on sign linguistics may lead BSL teachers to teach what they believe to be correct rather than what they actually use.

'THERE'



fig.2

A Scottish sign, which is not easily translated but could be glossed as

'HE/SHE/IT IS THERE (in a specific location but not in view)', uses outstretched wiggling fingers with a 'shhhh' mouth pattern (fig.2). However, as a kind of shorthand it is often described as 'THERE'. This may explain why the English mouth pattern 'there' is frequently seen replacing the 'shhhh' mouth in this sign.

Throughout England, before this borrowing and modification took place, 'THERE' was expressed by pointing with the index finger. Pointing is awkward to teach because it can be culturally sensitive, but what will happen to BSL variation if it is adapted for the benefit of others?

'FAMILY'



fig.3

The BSL research column

Some signs have been modified possibly in the belief that this will make them easier to learn. This seems a questionable process. We need to ask whether other languages are simplified or modified for similar reasons. In this example, the initialisation 'F' was borrowed from fingerspelling and incorporated into the sign 'FAMILY' (fig.3: flat hand moving anti-clockwise in front of the body), possibly as a memory aid.

'NEWS'



fig.4a



fig.4b

Some signs have become widespread through media influence. Due to its use on TV, a Scottish sign 'NEWS' (fig.4a) is now seen throughout the UK. The Deaf community saw it on TV and seem to have dropped their own signs for 'NEWS' (e.g. fig. 4b) and replaced them with this variation. What will happen to the local signs? Will they lie dormant, ready for re-use whenever they are needed or will they disappear completely?

'WOMAN'



fig.5

In some regions, especially the South, 'WOMAN' was produced with the flat hand bent and touching the upper chest (fig.5). This appears to have been replaced by 'GIRL', on the side of the cheek, but with the mouth pattern 'woman'. In the 1980s there were prevailing concerns about 'politically correct language', which may be why this sign changed and is now widespread.

The above is only a small selection of examples illustrating recent changes in BSL.

References:

- www.bbc.co.uk/voices/language/surveys
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