

## **Unimodal bilingualism in the Australian Deaf community: language contact between Australian Sign Language and Australian Irish Sign Language.**

The relationship between majority and minority language communities has often been examined, but it is not known what happens in communities where there are majority and minority sign languages, and whether the relationship between the two communities and their languages resembles that found in spoken languages. The study reported here was a part of a larger examination of unimodal bilingualism in two sign languages.

In the Australian Deaf community there is a minority Deaf community of people bilingual in two unrelated languages: Australian Sign Language (Auslan) and the Australian dialect of Irish Sign Language (AISL). Members of this community, who have AISL as a first language and Auslan as a second language, were interviewed in group discussions. Topics covered in these discussions included the relationship of AISL to Auslan and English, attitudes to each of these languages and the power relationships between the two sign languages.

Because of educational policies which date back to the 1940s, AISL has not been used in schools since the 1950s. Also, the low incidence of deafness in general and the small size of the AISL community mean that no Deaf people have learned AISL as a first language since then; those who have been born in the community since have learned Auslan as a first language. Additionally, the members of the minority AISL community have been pressured by the majority Auslan Deaf community not to use AISL in their community. As well as parallels with the experiences of other minority language groups, parallels can be drawn with studies such as Zurov's work on the 'double discrimination' confronted by Deaf Jewish people in Germany in the 1930s where the German Deaf community actively oppressed the minority Jewish Deaf community within their midst.

This presentation also includes a brief history of AISL in Australia and the establishment of schools for Deaf children from 1875 onwards; this historical perspective underpins an understanding of the centrality of schools in the transmission of sign language, and how language attitudes, demographics, educational policies and overt linguistic oppression can hasten language attrition in a Deaf community.

This research also contributed to the 'Irish in Australia: *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*' exhibition at the National Museum of Australia where Deaf AISL signers were able to record their history in their own language. This was the first time AISL was publicly acknowledged as a language group, and this in turn promoted awareness of the AISL community, its language and history to other members of the Deaf community and to the larger, hearing community. As well as an impact on the deaf community, the findings of this study are of great relevance in relation to present-day migrants to multilingual and multicultural Australia who are Deaf and use a different sign language.