Sociolinguistic variation in the 1 handshape in British Sign Language

Adam Schembri, Jordan Fenlon & Ramas Rentelis (University College London)

In this paper, we report the results from the first sociolinguistic study being undertaken as part of the British Sign Language Corpus Project, a three-year project (2008-2010) that will create a machine-readable digital video corpus of spontaneous and elicited British Sign Language (BSL) collected from 240 Deaf signers in eight cities across the United Kingdom. Our study examines variation in BSL signs produced with the 1 handshape (i.e., with a hand configuration involving the index finger extended from a fist, with the thumb and other fingers closed). Signs in this class exhibit variation with, for example, the thumb and/or pinky finger sometimes being extended in addition to the index finger. We currently have preliminary results from 1220 tokens of 1 handshape signs, collected from informal conversations involving 122 deaf signers in four cities: Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol. Like a similar study into American Sign Language, our results indicate that variation in the 1 handshape is conditioned by both linguistic and social factors. Significant factors include the grammatical category of the sign, with function signs (and pronominal signs in particular) showing significantly more variation than content signs. The phonological environment is also important, with our data showing evidence of both progressive and regressive assimilation. Lastly, gender is a significant social factor, with female signers producing significantly fewer tokens with handshape variation than male signers. We discuss our findings in relation to previous work on phonological variation in American, Australian and New Zealand sign languages (Schembri, McKee, McKee, Johnston, Goswell & Pivac, 2009; Lucas, Bayley & Valli, 2001). We will explore the results with regard to the relative importance of grammatical category versus lexical frequency effects, the importance of indexicality as well as the role of the surrounding phonological environment (Bayley & Lucas, 2005).

References

