

Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
SFB 833
Nauklerstr. 35, r. 3.11
Tübingen, DE 72074
[polina.berezovskaya@uni-tuebingen.de]


Reviewed by Rachel McKee, Victoria University of Wellington

Deaf people’s capacity to negotiate communication across different native sign languages has long been appreciated in the deaf world as a visual-language advantage. In recent decades a particular variety of ‘transnational’ signing has been promulgated by deaf leaders in international deaf domains of advocacy, sport, and academia; although the capitalized name suggests that International Sign (IS) is a fully conventional code, it is better described as a dynamic type of contact language that takes shape when deaf people from various countries interact in a sustained manner for specific purposes. Motivated by her experience with IS as a sign language interpreter working at international events, Lori Whynot set out to investigate an overarching question: How ‘universally’ comprehensible is expository IS as used in such contexts? Her doctoral research tackled this question by making a corpus of authentic IS texts by deaf conference presenters, analyzing linguistic features of the corpus, and then experimentally testing comprehension of texts by demographically diverse deaf audiences. This book reports on the findings of this research, and as such comprises the most theoretically and empirically ambitious description, to date, of the semiotic features, use, and comprehension of IS texts.

Ch. 1 introduces the emergence and definitions of IS (‘a range of semiotic strategies of interlocutors in multilingual sign language situations’; p. 1). Historical context and applied issues around the use of IS at international deaf events are described; for instance, W comments that the (increasing) provision of ‘interpretation via an unstable contact language [rather than via native sign languages] has not been without controversy’ (21). Concerns include the precision of information that IS can (or cannot) convey, and that the lexicon typically used in IS is more accessible to some language groups than others. Justifying this research, W also notes that training and standards for IS interpreting (or even direct use) are not yet firmly grounded in empirical documentation of a ‘moving target’.

Ch. 2 reviews the small literature showing that IS employs grammatical structures commonly found across native sign languages, and that a limited ‘conventional’ lexicon is supplemented by gestural, depicting, spatial, and other semiotic strategies (such as shared context). Previous studies indicate that American Sign Language (ASL; used in the US) and British Sign Language (BSL; UK) are key sources of IS vocabulary, and that lexical sources vary by user and context (Woll 1990, Rosenstock 2004), prompting W’s question about its comprehensibility outside the sphere of North America and Europe. Some previous studies have described features of IS (e.g. Allsop et al. 1995, Supalla & Webb 1995) or examined its use by interpreters (McKee & Napier 2002, Moody 2002); however, gaps remain in the description of IS and in the measurement of how well diverse deaf audiences make sense of IS texts. W’s study brings corpus-based and experimental evidence to critical consideration of questions not yet fully addressed in the existing literature.

A cognitivist framework has lately been applied to the analysis of lexico-grammar in signed languages (e.g. Taub 2001, Liddell 2003, Wilcox 2004), and W adopts this theoretical lens in Ch.
3 to frame a very informative overview of semiotic elements that characterize signed languages, including iconicity and metaphor, gesture, enactment, depiction, referential use of space, and lexicalized and productive signs. This account previews the types of elements that are identified in W’s corpus of IS and that feature in her comprehension experiment. This chapter establishes meaning making as the author’s central concern, reminding us that constructing and construing meaning from linguistic symbols entails complex interaction between speaker and observer cognition, other semiotic strategies, and the usage context.

Ch. 4 explains the data and methods. The research design (which is impressively rigorous), sampling, procedures, and instruments are detailed, supporting validity and enabling replication of the study. Five appendices illustrate the nature of the corpus, transcription and annotation conventions, and instruments used to assess comprehension. W’s discussion of methodological challenges (e.g. gloss-transcribing unconventional lexical units) is theoretically and practically informed. The heart of this chapter is the presentation of findings about the types and distribution of signs in a rich data set drawn from thirteen texts produced by deaf signers from twelve countries. Signs with consistent meaning comprised 63.6% of meaningful units in the corpus. Corroborating previous reports of a small lexicon, the top fifty signs accounted for almost half of the types. Shared context empowers these signs to do much work, since deaf interlocutors typically discuss common experiences of advocacy on human rights and language issues, which prompt highly frequent signs such as: deaf, sign, important, teach, work, association, help, progress, country, world. Many signs gain extra mileage through semantic extension or morphological modification to function as noun/verb/adjective. W’s findings confirm that in terms of sources of lexicon, ASL significantly dominates, and BSL and Gestuno signs (devised and disseminated from the 1970s) also contribute to frequent signs. Interesting findings about the distribution and nature of less lexicalized elements (such as depicting constructions) are also discussed. Tables and figures are used liberally throughout the book to display results and illustrate analysis of findings.

Ch. 5 reports on the comprehension experiment. The testing protocol was thorough: thirty-two participants from five continents (and different sign language families) were tested, using four measures: (i) holistic rating of comprehension; (ii) questions (posed in the person’s native sign language) that probed various levels of textual information, from discourse goals and main ideas to details and cohesive relations; (iii) identification of lexical meaning; and (iv) retell of selected segments. Additionally, IS text comprehension was compared with a parallel text in participants’ native language(s). These measures together provide a robust picture of comprehension. While the results of different tests (and groups) vary, W found that overall the average comprehension level was low, except for a group of six ‘high comprehenders’. In summary: ‘The majority of diverse sign language users in this study understand IS at 56% average, primarily receive information at a global, general discourse level, and misperceive or attempt to guess details and some main points with their own ideas, experience or imagination’ (267). Comparison of IS and native sign language text comprehension showed an average 24% loss of information in IS. And counter to intuition, results showed that gestural and ‘iconic’ depicting elements (considered to be the most transparent) were not consistently understood, due to the lack of familiar lexical antecedents, lack of contextual knowledge, or semantic interference from cognate signs in the viewer’s native sign language. Geographic disparities were evident: audiences from the US, Australia, and Europe understood considerably more than those from Japan and Brazil, with the latter two groups showing the largest gap in understanding between a text in IS and one in their own language. W explores various reasons for this. Her analysis of the effect of demographic characteristics revealed that the ‘top comprehenders’ fit an elite profile of those who were university educated, English proficient, widely traveled, native or early acquirers of sign language (a small minority of deaf people), and L1 or L2 users of ASL or BSL, and who interact frequently via IS.

In the final chapter, W does not shrink from the implications of her central finding that expository IS is less comprehensible to diverse deaf audiences than may be assumed by those who frequently use (and best understand) it. The author throws down a gauntlet by suggesting that the growing expectation to use IS as a medium in conferences and other international fora (e.g. online video posts) is motivated at least partly by a sociopolitical impulse:
The idea of IS may be more of a symbol that encapsulates a sense of universal Deaf identity and of inclusiveness, rather than a consistently viable contact language that stands up to linguistic scrutiny, as is given in this study. Historical social forces that impede deaf people’s access to their own naturally occurring visual language establishes a sociopolitical environment that begs for a crucible—a symbol that emerges from suppression and hardship, an idea that recognizes the unique visual nature of signed languages. IS as a symbol therefore has a place in international deaf discourse, despite the fact that potentially universal features of signed languages are not fully uncovered. (289)

A risk she points out is that international discourse in IS that aims to support the advocacy of deaf people in countries struggling to secure basic rights may unintentionally marginalize the participation of those who bring less of the contextual knowledge and relevant linguistic repertoire necessary to glean meaning from that discourse. In light of evidence that audience members generally construe the gist but not detailed information from IS texts, W also queries the justification for using IS in contexts where the use of a mixed spoken contact language would be considered unfit for the purpose—namely, academic conferences, and for interpreting complex information. Notwithstanding these applied problems that have no simple solutions, Understanding International Sign offers thought-provoking insights to anyone who has encountered the compelling phenomenon of IS—as a user, observer, or researcher. W’s richly detailed study demonstrates the value of corpus methodology in advancing understanding of authentic sign language use and should inspire further inquiry on IS. This book is of value to scholars and students of sign language linguistics and gesture, sign language interpreters and educators, and those interested in issues of language contact and translanguaging in superdiverse contexts.

REFERENCES


School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600
Wellington, New Zealand
[rachel.mckee@vuw.ac.nz]