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The ethics of documenting sign languages in village communities

The sign languages of large deaf communities in urban areas have been the subject of linguistic research and documentation for several decades, beginning with sign languages in the US and Western Europe in the 1960's and 70's, and increasingly, sign linguistics is now also covering the national sign languages of deaf communities in non-industrialised countries (e.g. Zeshan 2005, 2006). However, there are several other types of situations where sign languages are being used and which linguists are only just becoming aware of. This presentation focuses on a particular type of minority sign language and deaf community, the case of “deaf villages”, and the ethical implications of documenting these languages.

A “deaf village” is a rural community that has a history of hereditary deafness and has therefore developed a local sign language that is typically used widely by both the deaf and the hearing villagers (for the first in-depth studies that include linguistic descriptions, see Nyst 2007 and Marsaja, in press). Two of these sign languages, Adamorobe Sign Language from Ghana and Kata Kolok from Bali, were represented in our Sign Language Typology Research Group, and more recently, we are involved in a collaborative project documenting another such sign language, Country Sign, in Jamaica. These sign languages have many unique properties and are extremely interesting for sign language linguists, but many of them are endangered, ironically being under pressure from the dominant, national sign languages that are themselves minorities within the majority hearing population (Nonaka 2005).

The status of these sign languages poses new challenges for researchers in terms of research ethics. Using case studies from current research in Bali and in Jamaica, I address a number of ethical issues that arise from working with the concerned communities and their sign languages:

- Access to education for deaf, sign language using members of village communities.
- Implications of collecting and storing video data from village sign languages.
- Awareness about minority village sign languages among users of urban sign languages.
- Language and educational policies in this particular context.
- Revitalisation and documentation issues for endangered sign languages in village communities.

While ready solutions do not exist for any of these issues, it is important to begin considering them in the light of latest conceptual and technological progress in language documentation.

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