

Sign Language in Burma: some preliminary findings

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This paper presents some findings from recent contact with the deaf community in Yangon. Rather little is known about either the form or the use of sign language among the deaf community in Burma. According to the preliminary study by Kamei (2004), there may be distinct northern (Mandalay) and southern (Yangon) varieties. Some research by the Japanese Association of Deaf Linguistics is ongoing or planned, including a proposal to compile a dictionary of Burmese Sign Language(s).

This study aims to establish some basic facts about the form and use of sign language use in Yangon, through contact with the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf and the Yangon Deaf Association.

Following the advice of established researchers in signed languages, I initially collected a small vocabulary, using the 100-item Swadesh list modified by Woodward for use with signed languages, which excludes signs such as body parts and pronouns which are generally represented indexically in sign languages. Other areas of investigation are to include colour terms, school vocabulary, kinship terms, and placenames. Attention will also be paid to the use of finger-spelling and the influence of spoken Burmese.

Some attention is also paid to the various influences which have shaped the sign language currently in use in the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf in Yangon, including spoken Burmese and ASL, Korean sign language and possibly also an old BSL substratum, from observation of communication in the classroom and in informal situations in the school.

References

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