
Part 1: Socio-historical background

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Chapter 0 Preliminary considerations

It is common for grammars to include an introductory chapter that offers a general introduction to the language under investigation as well as its users. We encourage the grammar writer to include this type of information for the sign language to be described. If a certain variant of the sign language is described, this should be made clear at the outset.

The structure of this part is fairly flexible. As can be seen from the table of contents, we suggest including information about (i) the history of the sign language, (ii) characteristics of the Deaf community, (iii) the status of the sign language, and (iv) previous linguistic work on the sign language. The last section in particular will have an impact on the content of subsequent parts, as we encourage the grammar writer to include findings from previous studies in the grammatical description of the sign language. Clearly, alternative structures are possible. The overview of previous linguistic work, for instance, could be provided under the “History” header, and Deaf culture and/or Deaf education could be discussed under dedicated first-level headers – to give just two examples. Also, depending on the available information, sub-headers could be added.

Note that we adopt the convention of writing *Deaf* with a capital *D* when it refers to issues related to a community that is characterized by the use of a sign language. In contrast, *deaf* with a small *d* refers to the medical condition of not being able to hear. It is up to the grammar writer to decide whether to stick to this convention in the grammar.

Chapter 1 History

The history of a language normally starts when a community of users recognizes its language as different from that used by other neighboring communities. The aim of this section is to compile, if possible in chronological order, all the relevant information about the coming into existence of a sign language as well as its historical development. When was the sign language first mentioned or documented? Can the origin be traced back to a specific educational setting? Are there early documents that depict signs or a manual alphabet? The main analytical challenge is likely posed by the scarcity of documentation, as sign languages are non-written languages that have been considered unworthy of systematic study for a long time. Still, it is possible that the sign language under study is mentioned in historical documents, but maybe not as “sign language” but rather as “hand talk”, “manual language”, “manual communication system”, or “gesture”.

When compiling this information, the grammar writer should keep in mind that manual communication systems that are mentioned in historical sources are not necessarily related to the sign language which is now in use. There are, for instance, documents that describe the use of a signing system by Deaf people (“mutes”) at the Ottoman court from the 15th to the 17th century (Miles 2000). It is, however, unclear whether present-day Turkish Sign Language (TİD) is related to, or has been influenced by, this signing system, which reportedly allowed for the expression of ideas of whatever complexity. This uncertainty notwithstanding, in a grammar of TİD, this information should certainly be included. Also, for some sign languages, film documents are available that date back to the early 20th century. In the case of ASL, for instance, these films turned out to be a valuable source for the linguistic study [Socio-historical background – Chapter 4] of the language (Supalla 2001). If such documents exist, they should be mentioned here.

Note that this section is not meant to offer speculations about the evolution of sign language in general. Also, the focus of this section should be on the sign language. Aspects of the history of the Deaf community, the emergence of Deaf culture, and of the history of linguistic documentation may be mentioned where appropriate, but should be addressed in more detail in other sections. Consider, for instance, the case of Nicaraguan Sign Language, a sign language that recently emerged at a Deaf school in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua (Polich 2005). In this case, the history of the sign language is clearly related to Deaf education. Still, in this section, the discussion should focus on the fact that deaf homesigners from various villages first came together at the school in the late 1970s and that, given this contact, the sign language emerged, with structural complexity increasing from cohort to cohort. However, details of the educational setting and of linguistic documentation will be addressed in other sections.

We recommend that the grammar writer also include anecdotal evidence on the history of the sign language. For rural (or village) sign languages in particular, it will be informative to also address myths that exist concerning the origin of the language (see, for instance, Nyst (2007) for Adamorobe Sign Language, a village sign language from Ghana).

Moreover, in this section, the grammar writer will also illustrate historical relations with other sign languages (such as language families, historical influences from other sign languages, and current language contact with other sign languages). If available, the main macroscopic differences between the current sign language and its ancestor may be introduced here.

If sufficient information on the history of the sign language, or the existence of manual communication systems, is available, this chapter may have internal structure; for instance, “Origin of the sign language” (or “Myths concerning the origin of the sign language”), “Early documents”, “Historical development”, “External influences”, etc.

Chapter 2 The sign language community

2.1 Community characteristics

A sign language community can be broadly defined as a group of people sharing the same sign language. This definition includes a variety of signers with different levels of fluency in the sign language and various degrees of integration into the local community – think, for instance, of native, early or late learners, deaf vs. hearing signers, children of deaf adults (CODAs), deaf people with cochlear implants, interpreters, etc. Note, however, that such a broad definition of signing community may generate conflicts once the situation of a specific local community is considered. In one case, a signer may be considered as part of the community irrespective of her/his hearing status or fluency in the sign language, while in another case, the same signer might be considered a “foreigner”, that is, as external to the community. A potentially relevant factor of recent origin concerns whether a deaf person wears a cochlear implant, and how this is perceived by the community. In the present context, it may be of interest to consider how implanted deaf people are perceived by the community, for instance, whether this technology is perceived as a threat for the Deaf community, its language, and its culture [Socio-historical background – Section 2.3] (e.g. Cherney 1999).

To some extent, the nature of the community may depend on the social, political, and geographical context (Woll & Ladd 2003). Generally, sign language communities exist in a dominant group – minority group situation because signers constitute a minority within the hearing society. Also, with the notable exception of CODAs, they were traditionally fairly isolated from hearing members of the society as well as from neighboring Deaf communities, a fact that further contributes to the minority status. Thanks to technological advances, at least the latter type of contact, that is, contact between members of different communities, is now increasing, and cross-community links thus become more and more common.

Community characteristics may be quite different, however, in village communities where a local sign language has emerged – often due to an unusually high percentage of Deaf community members, resulting from a genetic predisposition and consanguineous marriage patterns (Nyst 2012). In at least some communities of this type, deafness is not (or at least less) stigmatized, and a considerable number of hearing members is also fluent in the sign language, a fact which obviously reduces the barrier between Deaf and hearing community members, thus leading to increased integration of the Deaf members.

Taken together, this section should (i) address the characteristics of the various community members as well as their level of integration into the sign language community, and (ii) describe the relation of the sign language community as a whole to the hearing community with which it is in contact. Note that in principle, this section could be combined with the next section on sign language users. In such a combined

section, the grammar writer could offer a typology of signers, possibly even devoting independent subsections to each type. For instance, a first distinction could be made between native and non-native signers, or alternatively, between deaf and hearing signers. While such an alternative structure would allow the grammar writer to address point (i) in a straightforward way, it is less clear how point (ii) could be included.

A final note concerns the history of the Deaf community. What we sketched so far concerns characteristics of the present-day community, but for many sign languages, it may also be worthwhile to address aspects of the community's history, in particular if it was characterized by periods of suppression or persecution (e.g. Deaf people during the fascist regime in Germany). Such details could either be included in the chapter on history [Socio-historical background – Chapter 1], in the present section, or in a separate section within Chapter 2. Note that in the present structure, aspects of community history that relate to educational settings will be addressed in the section on Deaf education [Socio-historical background – Section 2.4].

2.2 Sign language users

While the previous section sketches a general picture of the sign language community and characteristics of its users, the purpose of the present section is to provide the relevant demographic information to the extent available (see, for instance, Gras i Ferrer (2004) for LSE). In other words: this section should contain – possibly in the form of tables – concrete numbers concerning population statistics, such as: number of Deaf people (percentage of the entire population), number of hard-of-hearing people, number of signers (hearing and deaf). In Norway, for instance, there are 4–5,000 deaf individuals, but once we include in the count hearing signers like interpreters, teachers, and parents of deaf children, there are actually 16,500 users of Norwegian Sign Language. For all of these groups, subdivisions can be made based on gender or age group. Obviously, this is information that for many communities will be difficult to come by.

If possible, more specific information concerning the sign language community could be provided, such as: percentage of Deaf subjects with Deaf parents, number of Deaf people with a cochlear implant, number of deaf-blind people, number of second language learners, number of sign language interpreters, etc.

2.3 Deaf culture

It is generally assumed that – at least within some communities – Deaf people do not only constitute a linguistic minority, but also a cultural minority (Ladd 2003; Padden & Humphries 2005). In principle, a Deaf individual may at the same time be part of the national mainstream culture, but also of the national Deaf culture. It has even been

suggested that Deaf culture transcends national boundaries, that is, that due to shared life experiences, Deaf people from different cultural backgrounds share a culture.

Aspects of Deaf culture will be detailed in this section, no matter whether they are specific to the users of the sign language that will be described, or pertain to Deaf sign language users more generally. Generally, aspects of Deaf culture are closely related to issues of Deaf identity (Leigh 2008), and therefore the grammar writer may even decide to discuss these topics under a header “Deaf culture and Deaf identity” (remember that the grammar writer may choose to address Deaf culture in a separate chapter rather than in a section under the header “Sign language community”). At least three aspects should be addressed: cultural values and traditions, cultural expressions, and the existence of Deaf associations – this could even be done in dedicated subsections. For all three aspects, the grammar writer may wish to comment on their impact for Deaf identity.

Within many Deaf communities, certain cultural values and traditions are cherished (Rutherford 1988; Reagan 1995), such as the use of sign language, the exchange of information, certain greeting and parting rituals – to give just a few examples. Given that the Deaf community is rather small, it has, for example, been observed that it is common for two Deaf people who meet for the first time to inquire where the other went to school and to check whether they possibly have mutual acquaintances. Another cultural tradition that has received quite some attention are naming rituals, that is, how Deaf or hearing individuals get their name signs (e.g. Mindess 1990). The grammar writer should make an effort to identify these and other aspects that characterize Deaf culture of the local Deaf community.

As for cultural expressions, the grammar writer should report on the existence of Deaf poets and sign language poetry (Klima & Bellugi 1979), Deaf theatre (Peters 2006), and Deaf painters and writers, in particular if their artistic output reflects aspects of Deaf culture and Deaf identity (for the relation of sign language poetry and Deaf identity, see Sutton-Spence & de Quadros (2005)). Besides the focus on artistic output, it should be considered whether regular cultural events exist where Deaf and hearing people get together, such as events in the context of the World Deaf Day, theatre festivals, or “deaf discos” (e.g. “Sense” in the Netherlands). Deaf culture may also be reflected in Deaf humor, which often makes use of the iconic properties of sign language and focuses on awkward or funny situations resulting from deafness or the interaction of Deaf and hearing people (where often the hearing people are portrayed as those who don’t understand) (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2012). Characteristics of Deaf humor may therefore also be addressed in this section.

Finally, Deaf associations, local Deaf clubs, and other groups where Deaf people get together are an important component of Deaf culture, although their impact may, of course, go beyond cultural significance as they often offer more mundane, practical support for the Deaf community. Still, their activities generally create a sense of solidarity and cohesion and thus strengthen Deaf culture and identity. As for Deaf clubs, it has been observed that their importance is decreasing (Padden 2008), as

Deaf people now often choose other ways/places for interaction – thanks to technological advances and also increased self-confidence. An overview of such associations and groups should be provided (including important ones that do not exist anymore), together with the history of the most important organizations and their role in supporting, preserving, and disseminating sign language and Deaf culture. How are the various types of signers integrated in the different associations/groups? It may be particularly important to include groups that focus on specific topics (e.g. *Dovenshoah* ‘Deaf Shoah’ in Amsterdam: <http://www.dovenshoah.nl/>) or specific populations (e.g. homosexual Deaf people, deaf-blind people). It may even be informative to address when and to whom the first sign languages courses were offered, and where sign language classes are offered at present (but this could also be done in the section on language attitudes [Socio-historical background – Section 3.3]).

2.4 Deaf education

This section will be devoted to presenting how education of deaf children has been and is structured, with special attention to the role and importance of sign language in the education of deaf children. Given the fact that the vast majority of signers are not born into signing families, the primary social environment for language transmission (and sometimes language emergence, see the Nicaraguan case) are deaf schools. This makes the description of the education system and the different deaf schools crucial for the history of sign language and the Deaf community.

Consequently, the grammar writer will describe here how the education system for deaf children was organized in the past and is organized at present. What was and is the language policy at these schools? Options include: (i) strictly oral teaching methods (e.g. Samuel Heinicke in Germany in the 18th century); (ii) methods that combine natural signs with signs that represent words/morphemes (e.g. the method used by De L’Épée in Paris in the 18th century); (iii) bilingual (bicultural) programs that combine the use of sign language and spoken/written language. Crucial changes in the education system of the dominant community and their impact on the sign language are also discussed in this section – think, for instance, of the impact of the 1880 Milan congress (Lang 2003; Moores 2010).

The description of the school system may be guided by a distinction between residential and non-residential schools, or by educational methods. A map of the most important schools may be provided including information about:

- what type of children attended/attend the school (deaf only, deaf and hard of hearing, mixed classes including children with other disabilities, or mainstreaming);
- whether the school was mixed or for one gender only, whether it was religious or secular, or whether other segregating criteria played a role in restricting access to a school (e.g. schools for African-American pupils in the United States);
- whether the school was public or private.

The existence of Deaf schools, in particular boarding schools, is known to have had an important impact on the Deaf community in some countries. The concentration of pupil populations at individual schools may, for instance, give rise to sociolinguistic variation and dialects (see e.g. McCaskill et al. (2011) for Black ASL; LeMaster & Dwyer (1991) for gender variation in Irish SL). For example, in the Netherlands, a rather small country, lexical variation is clearly related to the existence of five schools for the Deaf. Findings concerning sociolinguistic variation [Socio-historical background – Section 4.4] will be addressed under the header “linguistic study”, but still, the grammar writer could include here a brief discussion of the (historical) impact of the educational system on variation, possibly providing some illustrative examples of signs from the core lexicon [Lexicon – Section 1.1] that differ between schools.

As for the present situation, we suggest the grammar writer also address specific policies at individual schools, for instance, the use of forms of sign-supported speech, the combination of different communication forms within one classroom, the placement of children with cochlear implants (which may now constitute the majority), the use of interpreters, the availability of individual speech therapy, the availability of sign language courses for parents and/or staff members, etc.

Chapter 3 Status

The status of a language is commonly defined in terms of its official recognition by the relevant political institution. Most aspects of language planning are connected to the status of a language, that is, whether it is officially recognized as the language of a specific (minority) community. Connected to the status, but still different from it, is the prestige of the language. In the case of sign language, this can be addressed from the perspective of the signing community and from that of the non-signing community.

Although a specific sign language may not be officially recognized by law, it is possible that various institutions make reference to sign language and may require its use in specific situations both public (e.g. in court rooms) and private (e.g. during legal transactions like selling/buying a house). For instance, in a particular country, a sign language may be mentioned and recognized as a natural language by a disability law (e.g. declaring the right for interpreters in specific situations), but may at the same time not be officially recognized as a minority language in that country. This weakens the connection between status and official recognition, since public institutions require the use of a language (implicitly recognizing its status) that is nowhere else recognized. Notice that this situation is crucially different from cases in which the use of a foreign spoken language is required in official situations.

In this section, the grammar writer will address issues related to the status of the sign language. This does not only imply the official status of the sign language, as

reflected in the country's legislation, but also includes topics that are not governed by law, but rather are initiated by associations or reflect common policies. In addition, the section may report on language attitudes, that is, opinions concerning the status of the language at the population level. Note that the content of this section may look rather different in the case of rural sign languages, in particular if they are shared by the Deaf and hearing population.

3.1 Current legislation

Within this section, the grammar writer may wish to proceed from the status of sign language in the broader perspective of supranational institutions to their status in national institutions. In the case of European sign languages, for instance, the grammar writer may summarize the current status of the legislation at the level of the European Union, and then focus on whether and how European prescriptions/laws are concretely implemented in the specific country (for “linguistic human rights” of Deaf people, see e.g. Krausneker (2008)). In some cases, more local institutions are ultimately responsible of the recognition. It is important to note that legal recognition of a sign language does not necessarily imply official status of the sign language.

The grammar writer may also discuss whether the sign language is recognized (as a minority language) by a constitutional law, as for instance in Finland, or whether the sign language has legal status through some other law (e.g. as part of a set of tools to be used to treat deafness), as in France and Spain, for instance. In some countries, the sign language may be recognized by autonomous regional governments but not at the national level. How the Deaf community reacted to the recognition may also be reported in this section.

If the sign language is not recognized, the grammar writer may report on previous efforts and current perspectives, for instance, on whether there is a debate about recognition and whether there have been attempts to draw a law aiming at recognizing the sign language. In the Netherlands, for instance, the discussion about the official recognition of NGT has been going on since the late 1990s. One prerequisite for the legal recognition of NGT was the standardization of the basic lexicon. In 2002, this project was completed, but still, legal recognition has not yet been granted (Schermer 2003). Efforts like this should be mentioned in the present section, but standardization as an instrument of language policy will be addressed in more detail in the next section.

3.2 Language policy

This section will illustrate and discuss how concrete actions supporting the use and the spreading of sign language have been put forward by public and private institutions and organizations (for overviews, see Reagan (2001), Schermer (2012),

and Quer & Quadros (2015)). An important component of language policy (sometimes also called “language planning”) is standardization. If there have been efforts of standardizing the sign language, this should be reported in this section. What institutions or subjects were involved? How was standardization approached and what (linguistic) decisions were taken? What was the outcome, and how was it received by the Deaf community? Standardization of a language falls under corpus planning which involves prescriptive interventions in the forms of a language. Moreover, corpus planning includes the codification of language, be it by means of dictionaries [Socio-historical background – Section 4.2] or grammatical descriptions [Socio-historical background – Section 4.1] (Schermer 2012).

Another type of language planning is status planning. Obviously, this includes the status of the sign language and its legal recognition, as discussed in the previous section. However, at a more practical level, the grammar writer is encouraged to also address whether the presence of sign language and sign language interpreters in the national media and at important political or social events is supported, as visibility of the sign language will also contribute to its status. In this context, it may also be informative to mention whether journals exist that are dedicated to Deaf issues (e.g. sign language, Deaf culture, social issues), such as e.g. the *American Annals of the Deaf* (since 1847), *Das Zeichen* in Germany, and *Woord & Gebaar* in the Netherlands.

Finally, policies concerning sign language acquisition should be addressed, that is, all efforts and strategies concerning the teaching and learning of sign languages (i.e. acquisition planning). Often national centers or Deaf associations are actively involved in such efforts, such as, for example, the Dutch Sign Center in the Netherlands. As pointed out by Schermer (2012: 904), “[a]cquisition planning is crucial for the development and survival of sign languages and should be taken more seriously by sign language users, researchers, and governments than has been done to date”. Questions to be addressed include: Are deaf teachers present in schools where signing deaf children are enrolled? Where are sign language courses offered, and how are they structured? Where are teaching materials developed, and what are the institutions that are responsible for evaluating the quality of the materials? How are sign language interpreters trained (including whether interpreter training programs exist at universities)? Obviously, this discussion may have a link to the section on Deaf education [Socio-historical background – Section 2.4], as it may also address the availability of sign language courses at schools.

3.3 Language attitudes

This section pertains to the prestige of the sign language within a community (Burns et al. 2001; Hill 2015). Two different aspects can be addressed, namely (i) how Deaf signers see their language and (ii) how non-signers see the sign language – this could even be done in separate subsections.

The recognition of sign languages as natural languages, as well as their linguistic study, are of fairly recent origin. Given that sign languages have long been considered inferior communication systems and that the use of sign languages has often been forbidden in the past, it is likely that attitudes towards sign language differ between generations – in the Deaf and hearing population. As for the former group, the grammar writer will discuss possible differences among signers that might influence or limit the occasions of sign language use and how these are related to age, gender, fluency in the sign language, level of awareness, hearing status, etc. How magazines, websites, and other media that are produced by the Deaf community treat sign language issues can also be discussed in this section.

As for the second group, the non-signers, this section will be devoted to describing how non-signers perceive sign language. What is the prestige of sign language outside the signing community? On the one hand, the grammar writer may want to consider whether there are official positions by sign language supporting associations, and how the sign language is generally presented in the national media. If clearly present, the often biased medical perspective on deafness may also be included. On the other hand, the perception of the lay person, that is, people who have no first-hand experience with either sign language or deaf people, should be reported here. What are the common misconceptions? The grammar writer should be aware of the fact that the level of awareness and the knowledge about sign language in the surrounding hearing society varies from country to country.

Chapter 4 Linguistic study

This section is meant for providing an overview of previous linguistic, lexicographic, and sociolinguistic research on the sign language to be described. Obviously, the grammar writer should not go into too much detail – in particular in the section on grammatical description – as findings from previous studies on aspects of the language's grammar/lexicon should be included in the respective sections in subsequent parts.

4.1 Grammatical description

In this section, the grammar writer will provide an overview of previous studies on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic structure of the sign language. It should also be pointed out whether individual studies focused on a particular variant/dialect of the sign language. It is not the purpose of this section to evaluate or criticize previous findings – although the grammar writer could point out whether certain findings should be taken with a grain of salt (e.g. given the methodology used

or certain participant characteristics). If two studies investigated the same domain but offer conflicting findings, this should be made clear.

4.2 Lexicographic work

While detailed grammatical descriptions of individual sign languages are scarce, lexicographic works of varying size exist for a fair number of sign languages. The existing works should be described in this section. Note that we use the term “lexicographic work” in a broad sense here. The grammar writer is encouraged to also report on historical sources that may only contain drawings or photos of a small number of signs (e.g. pamphlets and journals; see Woll (1987) for BSL). Sometimes, lists of signs are provided in more general works documenting the history and/or use of a sign language (see, for instance, Mallery’s (2001[1881]) monograph on Plains Indian Sign Language).

In addition, the grammar writer should describe more comprehensive dictionaries, be they in print or digital form. How many signs and what type of information does the dictionary contain? How are the lemmas organized (based on gloss in the spoken language or based on phonological characteristics of the sign)? Does the dictionary include example sentences that illustrate the context in which a particular sign may be used? Does it include a grammatical and/or historical sketch of the sign language? Are regional variants and/or standardized forms of signs included (Johnston 2003)? If the dictionary exists in book form, does it contain photos or drawings?

4.3 Corpora

In recent years, corpora of considerable size have been compiled for some sign languages (e.g. Auslan, NGT, Polish Sign Language). These corpora may contain different types of data, such as dialogues between signers (be they free conversations or discussions based on pre-specified topics) or retellings of stories or animated cartoons. Corpus data have been a rich source of data for linguistic and sociolinguistic studies.

If a corpus exists for the sign language under investigation (or maybe multiple corpora), then the grammar writer should provide details about it. The presentation should include information about the number of signers involved, participant characteristics (such as age, gender, region, family background), amount of data, and data types. Annotation strategies could also be described (e.g. Are left and right hand annotated separately? In how much detail are non-manuals annotated?), as well as whether the annotations are linked to a lexicon.

It should also be pointed out whether the corpus data were taken into account in writing the grammar.

4.4 Sociolinguistic variation

For various sign languages (e.g. ASL, Auslan, BSL), parameters of sociolinguistic variation have been investigated and described in some detail. Such descriptions may focus on diachronic and/or synchronic variation, and for both types of variation, they may address variation at the lexical, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse level (for overviews, see Lucas et al. (2001), Schembri & Johnston (2012), and Bailey et al. (2015)). An important factor in sociolinguistic variation is Deaf education [Socio-historical background – Section 2.4]. In particular, the existence of different schools for the Deaf in a country has been found to be the source of, for instance, regional and gender variation. Other external factors that may trigger variation are age, ethnicity, and socio-economic and language background – and again, at least some of these may result from the schooling system.

Hence, in this section, the grammar writer should describe what is known about sociolinguistic variation in the sign language and, where applicable, make a link to the discussion of Deaf education. The description could be complemented by a few illustrative examples. While the examples to be included will likely reflect lexical variation, which is often the most obvious type of variation (e.g. signs for the same concept from different regions), the grammar writer should make clear whether the grammatical description to be offered represents a particular variant, or whether it also takes into account sociolinguistic variation (e.g. regional variation in word order). Note that phonological variation resulting from the linguistic context (e.g. assimilation) need not be addressed in this section, as it will probably be discussed in the section on phonological processes [Phonology – Section 3.1].

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