Transformations in Deaf Studies
Implications for sign language policy, revitalization and rights

Maartje De Meulder
Gallaudet University — 2 November 2018
Transformations

New research lenses

Ways forward
“There is no known way that the continued age and shrinking of a linguistic community without replacement by younger native users can support a viable language beyond the life spans of the current majority cohort, despite all the goodwill in the world.”

(Johnston 2006: 165)
Transformations

New research lenses

Ways forward
Transformations in deaf networks

Transformations in larger ‘sign language’ networks

Transformations in applied linguistics and (critical) sociolinguistics

Societal and policy transformations

Linguistic ideological transformations

No transformations
Transformations in deaf networks
Transformations in deaf networks

Adopt a sign language or signs in their linguistic repertoire later + emerge outside traditional spaces

Children: virtual saturation of CI’s in Western countries

Deaf ‘new signers’

‘Traditional signers’ (older age group)

Expanded opportunity set in terms of language and modality choices

Globalization and deaf mobility: multilingual signers

Range in linguistic repertoires transcending national boundaries

Access to visual modality compromised

Expanded representation of different groups of deaf signers
Transformations in larger ‘sign language’ networks

New signers “Not Even Related to Deaf” (‘NERDs’)

Hearing children in deaf and deaf/hearing families (‘CODAs’)

Globalization and deaf mobility

Different motivations and investments

New signer parents

Access to visual modality and sign language compromised

#whyisign
Linguistic ideological transformations / debates

ASL purification debate

“Sign language for everyone but not ‘of’ everyone”

Sign language “preservation”

‘Linguistic moral panic’ about language change (Heller & Duchêne 2007)

Linguistic insecurity for new signers (motivation?)
Unbalanced revitalization
Mainly targeted at hearing signers

Deaf signers
Majority of deaf signers are new signers

Hearing signers
Outnumber deaf signers

De Meulder 2018
Transformations in applied linguistics and (critical) sociolinguistics

- Critique of languages as bounded concepts
- Languages as carriers of identity
- Societal and policy transformations
- Linguistic/semiotic repertoires and language practices
- Legal recognition of sign languages
- Sign languages are “endangered”

De Meulder, Murray & McKee forthcoming; Kusters et al. 2017; May 2018; O’Rourke 2018
Adapted UNESCO’s Endangered Languages Survey

1 = critically endangered
2 = severally endangered
3 = definitely endangered
4 = vulnerable

Limitations of national census data
Sociolinguistic information
Experts?
Ideologies?


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Sign Language</th>
<th>Name of Contributor</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Users</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Level of Endangement</th>
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<td>Algerian Jewish Sign Language (AJSL)</td>
<td>Sara Lanesman and Irlit Meir</td>
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<td>Israel</td>
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<td>Austria</td>
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<td>Dr Angela Nonaka</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Brazilian Sign Language (Libras)</td>
<td>Ronice Muller de Quadros</td>
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<td>Cesar Ernesto Escobedo Delgado and Olivier Le Guen</td>
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<td>Finland</td>
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<td>Kata Kolok</td>
<td>Dr Connie de Vos</td>
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<td>New Zealand</td>
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<td>Olivier Le Guen</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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Safar & Webster 2014
No transformations

Arguments to promote sign languages and to achieve sign language rights

Dependency argument

Linguistic bind argument

Ideologies useful to promote sign languages in the past must be adapted
Transformations in deaf networks

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Transformations in applied linguistics and (critical) sociolinguistics

Societal and policy transformations

Linguistic ideological transformations

No transformations
Now what?
“Shift the focus away from the survival of named linguistic codes to the preservation of individual and collective access to the fullest possible repertoire of language practices”
(Jaffe 2007: 71)

“We are curious about what it means to say a language ‘dies’ or ‘disappears’: what happened to change?”
(Heller & Duchène 2007:3)

“Speakers can change language (but languages need speakers)”
(Heller & Duchène 2007:7)

“Not necessarily attempting to bring the language back to former patterns of familial use but rather to bring the language forward to new users and uses”
(King 2001:26)
Transformations

New research lenses

Ways forward
New research lenses

Language practices, motivations and ideologies of 10 deaf and 2 hearing signers in Flanders, Belgium (age 18-62)
How these are linked to vitality of VGT
Linguistic ethnographic methodology:

Interviews (language biographies, attitudes)

Language use diaries (factors influencing language choice and use of semiotic repertoire)

Language portraits (12)
### Language use diaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uur</th>
<th>Taal</th>
<th>Plaats</th>
<th>Onderwerp (wat deed je)</th>
<th>Met wie (doof/horend + leeftijd)</th>
<th>Opmerkingen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16:45</td>
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<td>Reijn</td>
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<td>Langzaam en goed verstaan</td>
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<tr>
<td>17:00 - 18:30</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>Station</td>
<td>eten, drinken</td>
<td>Langzaam en goed verstaan</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:30 - 21:00</td>
<td>NL</td>
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<td>babymeel, kinderfauteuil</td>
<td>In gesprek met ouders en kinder</td>
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<tr>
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<td>NL</td>
<td>Gepraat</td>
<td>train</td>
<td>In gesprek met ouders en kinder</td>
<td></td>
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### Determining factors influencing language choice and use of semiotic repertoire

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Language portraits: why?

- Surpass limitations of vitality research // language dominance and competition (Lamarre 2013)
- Visual methods underused in applied linguistics research in general and in Deaf Studies specifically (O’Brien & Kusters 2017)

- Rich multimodal research tools
  - Visual and narrative
- “Us” and “them” become “me”
  - Shift in focus to idiosyncratic multilingual repertoire
- Multilingual mosaic
  - Way around “L1”, “L2” etc.
Ludo, 62, deaf
Marieke, 29, deaf
ALWAYS BEEN IN ME USING MY HANDS
Lena, 23, hearing
Feet are not a nice place to me. I’d rather not see them.
Transformations

New research lenses

Ways forward
Alternative forms of language transmission

Sign language learning

Language and modality choice + use of semiotic repertoires

Family language policy

Tools and networks

Who? How? WHY?

Mixed deaf/hearing

Hearing/hearing

Language practices and language choices (incl. those of new signers and other ‘non-native’ signers

How is this negotiated and adapted?

Implications for Deaf Studies, language policy and planning, applied linguistics, political theory
Multilingualism discourse

- Multilingual subjects (Kramsch 2009)
- Expanded opportunity sets
- Sensorial asymmetries
- Hybrid linguistic identities

Rights discourse

- What does this mean in a context where one can choose NOT to sign?
- Rights for whom? Nature? Scope?
- Rights to which language(s)?
- Rights to what? To language? To access to language?

How to recognize language rights while at the same time avoiding essentializing the languages and the speakers to which these rights apply

Legal protection of minority languages as protection of multilingualism (citizens’ right to know and use both the minority and majority language)

Laakso et al. 2016; May 2005; Patrick & Freeland 2004
“[...] there is no known way that the continued age and shrinking of a linguistic community without replacement by younger native users can support a viable language beyond the life spans of the current majority cohort, despite all the goodwill in the world” (Johnston 2006: 165)
https://maartjedemeulder.be
References


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