British Sign Language (BSL) dialects in contact: Investigating the patterns of accommodation and language change

Abstract

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Short-term linguistic accommodation has been observed in a number of spoken language investigations (e.g. Babel, 2010; Coupland, 1984). The first of its kind in sign language research, this study aims to experimentally investigate the effects of dialects in contact and lexical accommodation in British Sign Language (BSL). Twenty-five participants were recruited from Belfast, Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle and paired with the same conversational partner (a deaf native BSL signer “confederate” from Bristol). These pairs of signers from different regional backgrounds were involved in four tasks: a) a lexical elicitation task, b) a Diapix task, c) a dialect comprehension task, and d) an interview. The aim of the Diapix task (Van Engen et al., 2010) was to engage participants in spontaneous conversation whilst eliciting a large amount of regionally-specific sign data. Initial findings reveal that lexical accommodation has taken place with younger signers showing a higher proportion of accommodation than older signers.

In the dialect comprehension task, participants were asked to identify the correct meaning of a regional colour sign. Known to show considerable regional variation, BSL research has found conflicting evidence as to the degree of comprehension of these varieties (e.g. Kyle & Woll, 1982; Woll et al., 1991). However, observation of the conversational data in this study shows that signers’ have no difficulties interacting with signers from different regions with mouthing often disambiguating the meaning of regional signs. Recent corpus data has shown that variation in BSL is decreasing with younger signers using less regionally-bound variants and favouring those variants associated with London in most cases (Stamp et al., in prep.). Interestingly, initial findings in the current study have found that participants performed best comprehending Birmingham varieties with the comprehension of London varieties second best out of eight UK regions. One possible explanation is that some Birmingham signs integrate the initial fingerspelled letter of the English word into the sign production (e.g. fingerspell ‘P’ for the sign PURPLE). This paper will explore the full findings of this study considering how the findings relate to spoken language studies.

References

• Stamp, R., Schembri, A., Fenlon, J., & Rentelis, R. (in prep.). Sociolinguistic variation and change in British Sign Language number signs.
