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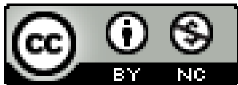

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INTRODUCTION

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1. Introducing signed languages

Signed languages are the natural, visual-gestural languages of Deaf communities around the world.[1] Contrary to popular belief, there is not one universal, international signed language. Even different countries that all e.g. have English as their spoken language, may have different signed languages. In the United States, for example, American Sign Language is used, in Australia the signed language is called Auslan, and in the UK the Deaf community uses British Sign Language. This indicates that signed languages have evolved independently, although there is language contact between signed and spoken languages. This is evidenced by the fact that mouth movements resembling the pronunciation of words from the surrounding spoken language seem to be an integral part of many signed languages (Boyes Braem & Sutton-Spence, 2001). In addition, there is evidence of language contact between signed languages, for example in some African countries where local and imported sign languages coexist (Nyst, 2010). There are also regional signed languages, e.g. Catalan Sign Language and Spanish Sign Language in Spain.

Signed languages were for a long time considered to be nothing but primitive systems of gestures and pantomime and therefore were believed to be more

1 In many countries there are actually more hearing than deaf people who know and use the national signed language, as it is also used by relatives and friends of deaf people and by people who use it in a professional capacity, e.g. signed language interpreters.

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limited in what they could express than spoken languages. At the same time, signed languages are often considered to be manual versions of the ambient spoken language in a community. These somewhat paradoxical beliefs about signed languages often reside side by side. The latter view seems to be inspired by the idea that signed languages were invented by someone, to "give" to people who cannot use a spoken language. Different approaches to deaf education have resulted in an active suppression of the use of signed languages for approximately 100 years, beginning in the second half of the 19th century. Despite this, signed languages around the world have survived and continued to evolve.

Spoken and signed languages have been shown to share fundamental properties at all levels of linguistic structure. There are, however, also linguistic characteristics of signed languages that are modality specific, e.g. the use of space for linguistic purposes (Nilsson, 2008) and a (more) simultaneous organisation (Vermeerbergen, Leeson & Crasborn, 2007). The transmission of signed languages from one generation to the next also differs from that of spoken languages. Since the majority of deaf children are born to hearing (most often non-signing parents) they usually do not start early signed language acquisition in their homes.

2. Signed language linguistics: Historical context

2.1. The start of modern signed language linguistics: The early years

For a long time, misconceptions about signed languages were also shared by the scientific community, including scholars in the field of linguistics (cf. Sapir, 1921 and Myklebust, 1957, in Armstrong & Karchmer, 2009). Signed languages were not considered genuine natural languages, and they were generally ignored in linguistic research. Signed language linguistics is thus a relatively young field of study, pioneered by Tervoort's (1953) doctoral dissertation documenting the signing of deaf children in the Netherlands and Stokoe's (1960) description of the linguistic structure of American Sign Language. During the 1960s and 1970s, other, initially mainly American, researchers began to express an interest in the linguistic structure of signs and signed language(s). In 1968, an article reporting on Tervoort's doctoral study was published in *Lingua* (Tervoort, 1968) and in 1975, two articles on American Sign Language were published in *Language* (Friedman, 1975 & Frishberg, 1975).

Towards the second half of the 1970s, several linguists in other (mainly European) countries also began to study their local signed languages. It is often assumed that this arose as a result of research on American Sign Language, but personal communication with some of these European pioneers has revealed

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that this was not the case. Instead, at least in some countries, there seemed to be a link between the start of signed language linguistics and renewed interest in the use of signs/signed languages in deaf education (Vermeerbergen & Leeson, 2011). *Sign Language Studies*, the first dedicated journal was launched as early as 1972, edited by William Stokoe.[2] The very first international symposium on signed language research was organised in Skepparholmen, Sweden in June 1979. Twenty out of the 26 papers presented at the conference appeared in the proceedings (Ahlgren & Bergman, 1980). Eight of these 20 papers were presented by American scholars, and 12 papers were by European scholars, of which five were from a Scandinavian country and five were from the UK. Most of the chapters in these proceedings do not present a linguistic analysis of a signed language, but rather discuss the acquisition of signs or a signed language or concern a form of sign supported speech ("Signed Danish", "Signed German", etc.)[3] rather than the national signed language proper, or they consider one or more aspect of methodology in signed language research. Although there were some universities where there was a signed language group or lab already in the 1970s, many pioneering signed language researchers worked on their own. This is likely to have made international scientific meetings even more important, as it offered opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for collaboration. We may also note here that the signed language research groups or labs that did exist often were not situated within a linguistics department, but rather affiliated with educational departments or departments of audiology/speech therapy.

The second *International Symposium on Sign Language Research* was organised two years later, in Bristol in the UK, and in the next year, 1982, the first *European Congress on Sign Language Research* was organised in Brussels. The first *Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research* conference was held in Rochester, USA, in 1986. In the same year, ISLA, the International Sign Linguistics Association, was founded. It was based in the UK, as "a network of

2 Early sign language linguistics work was sometimes published in American Annals of the Deaf (e.g. Tervoort 1961), a professional journal "dedicated to quality in education and related services for deaf or hard of hearing children and adults" (http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/annals), first published in 1847.

3 Sign supported speech, also known as "simultaneous communication" or "sign systems" started to be developed in the 1960s and 1970s mainly for use in deaf education. Signs, often taken from the national signed language, are produced simultaneously with the national spoken language. The morphosyntactic system of the spoken language is usually expressed via newly constructed manual signs.

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researchers interested in aspects of sign language studies" with the principal aim to "facilitate production, dissemination and discussion of both theoretical and applied ideas within a sign linguistics framework" (Brennan & Turner, 1994:vi).

Proceedings or selected papers were published for most of these early international and European conferences. Needless to say, these volumes were very important for the signed language linguistic community at the time. Today, they offer an insight into the research community, research topics and questions, and the theoretical approaches that were prevalent then. One observation we can make is that, especially from the 1980s onwards, there was an increase in international collaboration. In some cases, this resulted in cross-linguistic studies involving two or more signed languages, although the majority of the studies remained focused on one single signed language. A second important observation concerns the broad range of topics and themes addressed during this period, including, for example, the lexicon, sociolinguistic variation, the different levels of linguistic description (phonology, morphology, syntax), non-manual behaviour, signed language learning and teaching, (bi-modal) bilingualism, signed language acquisition, signed language emergence and home signing, psycholinguistics, aspects of the Deaf community and culture, history, literature, methodological issues, etc.

An important research focus during this early period consisted in the comparison of spoken languages and signed languages, and approaches to the analysis of the latter. Karlsson (1984) discusses two very different approaches to signed language analysis, which he labels the "oral language compatibility view" and the "sign language differential view". The compatibility view presupposes that most of the characteristics of signed language structure align with what is typically described for spoken languages (i.e. oral languages), and that the approach to the analysis of signed languages can, and even should, be modelled on spoken language research. The differential view suggests that signed languages are so unique in structure that their description should not be modelled on spoken language analogies. Although in the first decades of signed language research the latter approach was clearly also present (e.g. Cuxac, 1985, 1987; DeMatteo, 1977), the majority of researchers adopted the "compatibility view". There are several reasons for this, the main of which being that signed language researchers wanted – or even needed – to provide evidence that signed languages were indeed fully-fledged, genuine languages, worthy of linguistic study in their own right. This was mostly done by demonstrating parallels between signed and spoken language grammar and structure (Vermeerbergen 2006). Much of the work on signed languages from the 1970s to the 1990s was primarily

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descriptive in nature, or assumed a generative framework, with relatively few exceptions (Cormier, Schembri & Woll, 2013).

To conclude this section on the early development of the field, we would like to note that early work was not always published internationally, as researchers also published in their own (written) languages, as in the case of research reports and master's or PhD theses. There was also a need for easily accessible information on the national signed language for the local Deaf community and those working with that community. Considerations like these made researchers sometimes focus on publishing in the local/national written language.

2.2. From 1985 till 2007: A snapshot

Focusing on different approaches to the universality of signed languages, Woll (2003) distinguishes a modern and a post-modern period in signed language research, with the post-modern period starting around 1985. Where it was generally claimed that signed languages "differ substantially from each other and are mutually unintelligible" (ibid., p. 20), in the modern period, (early) cross-linguistic comparisons indicated that signed languages might resemble each other more closely than spoken languages. Early observations of common grammatical features across signed languages were related to the fact that, from the 1980s onwards, more and more signed languages were being studied, although still mainly limited to North America, Australia, and Western Europe. The observation that signed languages seemed to be typologically more homogeneous than spoken languages was frequently associated with specific properties of the visual-gestural modality. More recently, there has been an increasing interest in comparative studies that also include non-Western signed languages (Perniss, Pfau & Steinbach, 2007).

Starting from the second half of the 1980s, i.e. the post-modern period, ideas regarding the relation between spoken and signed language studies have gradually changed. Signed language studies are moving away from a description of signed languages as essentially analogous to spoken languages, and we see a growing interest in the properties that are typical of (although not always unique to) signed languages (Vermeerbergen, 2006). Examples are the use of space (Engberg-Pedersen, 1993; Nilsson, 2004, 2007; Perniss, 2007), simultaneity (Miller, 1994) and iconicity/visual imagery (Taub, 2001).

There was also increased consideration of similarities between signed languages and co-speech gesture, which both are expressed through the visual-gestural modality. Because early work on signed languages emphasized their linguistic nature, the presence of gesture in signed language use was not considered. Then the idea that gesture may be combined with signs was considered

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but generally discarded. The consensus seemed to have been that in signed languages, gesture either moves away from the manual channel (and may "move" to the mouth, e.g. Sandler, 2003) and/or it loses its true gestural character and becomes part of the linguistic system, e.g. McNeill, 1993 (Vermeerbergen & Demey, 2007). However, several studies after the year 2000 explore the possible presence of gesture in signed language structure, and recent analyses support a model of signed language structure that incorporates both linguistic and gestural (also called "non-linguistic", in the sense of gradient and non-conventional) elements (e.g. Liddell, 2003; Schembri, 2001; Schembri, Jones & Burnham, 2005; Vermeerbergen & Demey, 2007, amongst others).

This new perspective led to the revision of some earlier interpretations of signed language structure, e.g. with regard to so-called "classifier constructions" (Vermeerbergen & Van Herreweghe, 2010). Early analysis of classifier constructions in signed languages often made comparisons to the classificatory verbs in Athapaskan languages. Early descriptions suggested that the component parts of these constructions were discrete, listable and specified in the grammar of individual signed languages, each having morphemic status (e.g. Supalla 1982). More recent studies, often using the term "depicting signs", instead considered the possibility of dealing with these constructions as mixed forms, i.e. structures involving both linguistic and "non-linguistic components" (e.g. Liddell, 2003; Schembri, Jones & Burnham, 2005), which align with earlier work by Cogill-Koez (2000), who argued that a "classifier construction" was a visual representation of an action, event, or spatial relationship rather than a lexical or a productive sign.

Research on pointing actions has also revealed interesting parallels between pointing gestures and pointing signs (Liddell, 2000; Vermeerbergen & Demey, 2007), and work on constructed action, also called enactment, i.e. the use of bodily movements, postures and eye gaze to construct actions and dialogue in order to show characters, events and points of view, showed how signers habitually integrate elements of showing into their signing (Metzger, 1995; Liddell & Metzger 1998; Liddell, 2003; Quinto-Pozos, 2007).

A growing number of researchers began to propose that signed languages be analysed as heterogeneous systems in which meanings are conveyed by using a combination of elements, rather than as homogeneous systems where all major elements of signing behaviour are considered to be equal parts of a morphosyntactic system (e.g., Schembri 2001; Liddell, 2003). Emerging from this strand of research was the idea that when the communication of signers and speakers is compared, speech plus co-speech gesture rather than speech alone should be considered as an equivalent to signing (Vermeerbergen & Demey, 2007). Both

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speakers and signers coordinate different articulators and convey information by producing composite multi-modal expressions to convey information.

With respect to publications during this period, we may note the following developments:

1. The publication of journals and periodicals in languages other than English. In France for example, from 1977 till 1987, *Coup d'Oeil* was published. In the Netherlands, from 1986 onwards (probably until 1992), *GebaarEnNieuws* was published, a newsletter in written Dutch mainly aimed at the national Deaf community. In Germany, *Das Zeichen* was established in 1987. It still exists today (June 2018) as the only journal on the topic of signed languages and Deaf communities in the area of German-speaking countries.
2. The publication of the first International Bibliography of Sign Language, in 1993 (Joachim & Prillwitz, 1993).
3. The launch of a new international journal, focusing on signed language linguistic research, called *Sign Language & Linguistics* in 1998.
4. Publication of a number of descriptions of (parts of) the grammar of different signed languages, often in the national written language (e.g. Prillwitz & Leven, 1985, for German Sign Language; Schermer, Fortgens, Harder & de Nobel, 1990, for Sign Language of the Netherlands; Pilleux, Cuevas, & Avalos, 1991, for Spanish Sign Language; Dubuisson & Nadeau, 1993, for Quebec Sign Language; Moody, 1993, for French Sign Language; Vermeerbergen, 1996, for Flemish Sign Language; Malmquist & Mosand, 1996, for Norwegian Sign Language; and Ahlgren & Bergman, 2006, for Swedish Sign Language).
5. In some countries, (partial) grammars were also produced in the form of a so-called "signing book", i.e. a publication in a signed language, recorded on video or (later) CD-ROM (see also Section 4).
6. Books, and especially edited volumes, continued to be important for dissemination of research results.

3. The last decade: Most recent trends and developments

Over the past recent decades, the field of signed language linguistics has expanded considerably. With this growth, and the specialisation into subfields, it has become increasingly difficult to keep track of everything that is going on. Where there was once a single dedicated journal, there are now several, and work on signed language linguistics is also more readily accepted for publication in journals and (edited) books with a much broader scope. There are also a number of specialised series, dedicated to a specific subfield or theme, e.g. the *Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities series* (Gallaudet University Press), the

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Sign Language Typology series, and the *Sign Language and Deaf Communities series* (both published by De Gruyter). Increasingly, volumes focusing on signed languages are included in book series previously dealing with spoken language linguistics only. Another indication that the field is becoming more established is the publication of extensive international handbooks on signed language linguistics, such as Pfau, Steinbach and Woll (2012). Additionally, chapters on signed languages are increasingly being included in more general handbooks, e.g. Guendouzi, Loncke & Williams (2010), Narrog & Heine (2011), and Enfield, Kockelman & Sidnell (2014). Rather than attempting to cover all aspects of the field, this section will focus on three of the more prominent developments influencing signed language linguistics during the most recent decade.[4]

3.1. Increasing number of signed languages studied

One important direction in which the field is growing, concerns the number of signed languages being described. There are now descriptions (albeit partial) available for many more national signed languages than was previously the case, and from more parts of the world. In addition, we see an increase in descriptions of so called "village sign languages", which are local indigenous signed languages used in areas with high incidences of congenital deafness (Meir, Sandler, Padden & Aronoff, 2010). In such areas, it is common that a large proportion of the hearing people living in the community can also use the signed language for communication. Examples of village signed languages include Adamorobe Sign Language (Nyst, 2007), Kata Kolok (De Vos, 2012) and Yucatec Maya Sign Language (Johnson, 1991; Le Guen, 2012).

We now also see more work on the specific characteristics of what is known as International Sign (IS) (e.g. Rosenstock & Napier, 2015). IS is a contact variety that is used for cross-linguistic communication between users of different signed languages. It is used in a number of different contexts, particularly at international meetings such as the World Federation of the Deaf Congress, and events such as the Deaflympics. IS is not as conventionalised or complex as natural signed languages. However, there is an accreditation system in place for International Sign interpreters.[5]

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4 We may note here that some of the developments we describe started before 2007, but they have increased in importance in the last decade.

5 https://wfdeaf.org/our-work/wfd-wasli-international-sign-interpreter-accreditation/ (Accessed 20 April, 2018.)

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As more and more signed languages are being described, comparative studies on signed languages that include less studied (non-Western) signed language become possible (Schwager & Zeshan, 2008; Lepic, Börstell, Belsitzman & Sandler, 2016), and it is gradually becoming easier to engage in larger-scale typological research (Zeshan & Perniss, 2008, as well as other volumes in the *Sign Language Typology series*).

When previously un-described (or under-described) signed languages are described, the researcher(s) involved may come across linguistic structures and mechanisms that were already documented for other signed languages, in some cases quite some time ago. Especially if the early publications are not (or no longer) easily available, there is a risk that older work is overlooked. And as the field – and the number of publications within the field – continues to grow, it becomes more and more difficult to keep track of all that has been published.

3.2. Contemporary approaches to signed language linguistics: specialising across sub-disciplines

Whereas much (but not all[6]) of the early signed language linguistic work was done within a structural or generative framework that was highly influential at the time, the field of signed language linguistics has continued to evolve in line with the field of linguistics in general. Today, rule-based approaches coexist with meaning-based and usage-based approaches, as promoted within for example cognitive linguistics and functional approaches. There is also work being done with construction grammar, and a growing methodological interest in actual language use, which links up with the field of corpus linguistics (Geeraerts, 2003).

The specific ways in which the field has developed and broadened, which includes researchers becoming increasingly specialised in their work, is currently noticeable also in e.g. the more specialised conferences that are organised. Just as *Sign Language Studies* used to be "the" journal to publish in, "the" conference for signed language linguists for a long period of time was *Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research* (*TISLR*). Now, we are witnessing a diversification with new conferences focusing on a number of topics. There is, for example, a series of conferences devoted to signed language acquisition, in a very broad sense, with the 3rd *International Conference on Sign Language Acquisition* (ICSLA) taking place in 2018 (http://www.icsla2018.com/). There is also a series of yearly

6 Early work also includes e.g. sociolinguistic studies on variation, mainly lexical variation, often with a lexicographic purpose.

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conferences for researchers doing formal and experimental research on signed languages: *FEAST*, which is short for *Formal and Experimental Advances in Sign language Theory*. This has also resulted in the electronic, open access *FEAST Journal:* http://www.raco.cat/index.php/FEAST. The most recent addition to the field is the first international workshop on cognitive and functional explorations in signed language linguistics, *Sign CAFÉ 1*, to be held in the summer of 2018 (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/englishlanguage/events/2018/sign-cafe.aspx).

While it is indeed clear that within the domain of signed language linguistics more and more specialisation is taking place, it is still important for many researchers to remain acquainted with and engage in a wide range of research. For example, in some countries there are still very few signed language researchers (or even only one), and it may be necessary for them to engage in many different types of research/activities, resulting in the researcher not being able to specialise. The societal relevance of signed language research, including the need for information on the linguistics of specific signed languages as well as the need for signed language teaching and signed language interpreter training, certainly also plays a role here. The following comment from Brennan (1986: 16) is still relevant:

> "The needs and demands of those wishing to learn sign language are possibly the most pressing of the influences affecting us today. It is hard to focus on, for example, the most linguistically efficient abstract representation of simultaneous patterning within the word when people are crying out for basic information on the grammar of sign."

Societal needs may also result in researchers publishing their work locally, in the national language, and/or invest a lot of time in dissemination activities directed towards the local Deaf community. Nevertheless, as signed language linguists we also have a responsibility to make our work known to other linguists – and beyond the field.

3.3. Technological advances

Early signed language researchers faced specific problems due to the lack of a widely accepted writing system for signed languages and limitations in the technologies available to them. Early signed language data were video-recorded on tape, using analogue video cameras. Transcription was initially done with pencil and paper, while viewing the recorded data with the help of a video

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player that would, at best, be equipped with a remote control and the possibility to view the recording in slow motion.

In the past, any set of data on which a linguistic analysis was performed was called a "corpus". Fortunately, the advent of digitized video-recordings, computer technology and software development has made it possible to build substantial signed language corpora. Signed language corpora consist of large amounts of annotated texts in a machine-readable form, which aims to be maximally representative of the language and its users and can be consulted to study the type and frequency of constructions in a language (Johnston & Schembri, 2013; Fenlon, Schembri, Johnston & Cormier, 2015). This is an important development, as the previous reliance on small sets of data and/or the intuitions of only few informants is problematic, especially in view of the fact that signed language use is highly variable (Johnston & Schembri, 2013).

The first modern signed language corpus projects began in 2004 in Australia and in Ireland, soon followed by a number of similar projects for other European signed languages, e.g. Sign Language of the Netherlands, British Sign Language, German Sign Language, and Swedish Sign Language.[7]

The first stage in building a corpus is to collect data and convert these into a digital video archive. The Auslan Corpus, for example, contains approximately 300 hours of digital video recordings of naturalistic signing, by 255 native or near-native deaf participants, edited into approximately 1,100 video clips suitable for detailed annotation (Johnston, 2008).

In the next stage, annotation work is undertaken, and the digital video archive is transformed into a modern linguistic corpus. Johnston (2010) stresses that in order for the dataset to become machine-readable and searchable, two types of annotation are essential: ID glossing and a translation into one or more written languages. Annotation of signed language corpora is often done using the open-source computer software ELAN, developed by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) in Nijmegen, the Netherlands (Crasborn and Sloetjes, 2008). All existing signed language corpora are currently in the process of undergoing linguistic annotation or are awaiting annotation.

7 Almost ten years before, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and their team collected a large-scale corpus of American Sign Language (e.g. Lucas, Bayley & Valli, 2001). Their work clearly inspired later signed language corpus projects, but that corpus is not considered to be one of the modern signed language corpora, mainly because it has not been appropriately annotated and is thus not machine-readable.

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When collecting a corpus, it is of the utmost importance to also collect and store metadata related to the linguistic data gathered. In many recent projects, the *IMDI metadata database* is being used, an already existing database which has been further developed in the context of the *ECHO project* at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (The Netherlands) (Crasborn & Hanke 2003; also see www.mpi.nl/IMDI/).

Corpora are often built for linguistic research, but the data can also be used for the preservation of older signed language data for future research (i.e. the documentation of diachronic change) or as authentic materials to be used in signed language teaching. Johnston (2008, 82) expresses the need for signed language corpora as follows:

> "Signed language corpora will vastly improve peer review of descriptions of signed languages and make possible, for the first time, a corpus-based approach to signed language analysis. Corpora are important for the testing of language hypotheses in all language research at all levels, from phonology through to discourse (…). This is especially true of deaf signing communities which are also inevitably young minority language communities. Although introspection and observation can help develop hypotheses regarding language use and structure, because signed languages lack written forms and well developed community-wide standards, and have interrupted transmission and few native speakers, intuitions and researcher observations may fail in the absence of clear native signer consensus of phonological or grammatical typicality, markedness or acceptability. The past reliance on the intuitions of very few informants and isolated textual examples (which have remained essentially inaccessible to peer review) has been problematic in the field. Research into signed languages has grown dramatically over the past three to four decades but progress in the field has been hindered by the resulting obstacles to data sharing and processing."

In the last decade, a series of workshops and other international scientific meetings were (and are being) organised to combine and share expertise in signed language corpus development and to promote international cooperation. During these meetings participants discuss data collection, technical formats, organisation of metadata, annotation processes, as well as questions of accessibility, dissemination and use of signed language data. A number of publications results from such meetings, e.g. Dreuw, et al. (2010) and Crasborn, et al. (2012), the latter specifically dealing with the interface of corpus and lexical databases. Indeed, often, the creation of a signed language corpus goes hand

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in hand with the development of lexical database, which may in turn be used to create online dictionaries (e.g. the British Sign Language SignBank (Fenlon et al. 2014) and BSL SignBank Dictionary (http://bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk/about/dictionary/).

Finally, another change that has been brought about by technological advances relates to illustrations included in or accompanying publications. With digital video files and new computer software, it is now easy (and cheap) to include a large number of photo illustrations in journals and books. Also, printed books may have an accompanying DVD with filmed examples or a website containing even more video clips. There are, of course, also more and more digital web-based publications that allow the inclusion of video-based examples.

4. The position of signed languages and deaf scholars in signed language linguistics

In the first sentence of this introduction we described signed languages as the languages of Deaf communities. In this concluding section, we would like to discuss the position of deaf people, deaf scholars and signed languages within signed language linguistics. The majority of pioneering researchers were hearing linguists, who were late L2 learners of the signed language they studied, and some had only limited signing skills.[8] Often, deaf informants and/or research assistants were engaged to help with data collection, annotation and analysis. At the time, academic training was not readily accessible for deaf members of research teams, e.g. because they did not meet the admission requirements and/or because there were no possibilities to have interpreters in education.

Currently many signed language researchers have good language proficiency levels in the signed language they are studying and working on. There are also signed language linguists who have acquired a signed language as their first language, both hearing and deaf, and these researchers with native signing skills bring an important perspective to the field. The number of deaf researchers within the field of signed language linguistics is, however, still rather limited, especially at postgraduate level. This continues to be related to educational opportunities, including the difficulties faced by deaf students regarding access to higher education. Even where higher education is or has been possible, it is still not easy for deaf academics to push through to higher positions. (Kusters, De Meulder & O'Brien, 2017).

8 This is related to the fact that in many countries opportunities for formal learning of signed languages were very limited or even non-existent.

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In 1996-97, Kyle and Allsop conducted a review of the status of European signed languages. They found a striking disparity between content written about Deaf communities and what material Deaf communities themselves had access to in their own languages (Kyle & Allsop, 1997). Since 2002 there are international conferences specifically targeting deaf academics, organized by the Deaf Academics organization. One of the aims of the *Deaf Academics Conferences* is to gain a better understanding of the issues that they face in the academic environment (http://dac2017.com/about/). Such conferences are video-recorded but do not often find their way into print and they are not always accessible to hearing (non-signing) researchers (Kusters, De Meulder and O' Brien, 2017).

Signed languages do not have written forms, and experiments with the development of a writing system (e.g. SignWriting) has had only limited success. In the 1990s, technological developments, especially in the field of digital video, made it possible to video-record longer texts in a signed language for dissemination by means of video cassettes or later CDs and DVDs. From the second half of the 1990s onwards, there were some experiments producing so-called "signing books" (cf. the European "signing books project"), e.g. (partial) reference grammars or other linguistic texts targeting Deaf communities members (e.g. Vermeerbergen, 1999). Some universities also offered deaf students the opportunity to produce papers in the national signed language, including master dissertations and sometimes, but to a lesser extent, doctoral theses. However, such practices have not become widespread.

In addition, English remains the primary language of the academy, and this significantly affects the functional employment of signed languages by students of signed languages and deaf academics. A pilot study carried out in Belgium and Ireland in 2013 explored how students and academics create and use signed materials (Leeson, Sheikh & Vermeerbergen, 2015). There, one Irish deaf academic noted that he and his colleagues present their own academic work at conferences in a signed language, but they prefer to prepare publishable data in English even when they may feel less confident about their skills in written English. Just as in Ireland, the Flemish informants reported that when offered the opportunity to hand in (student) work presented in a signed language, they did not avail themselves of this option for several reasons (Leeson, Sheikh, & Vermeerbergen, 2015:178):

1. They were not used to using a signed language for academic purposes and/or were used to using English for academic writing (more so than Dutch, their primary "spoken" language).

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2. They said that writing (in English) allows one to go back, reread, rewrite, and restructure, but they felt that this is not possible in a signed language text.
3. They felt that no clear guidelines exist on how to produce a paper in a signed language. For example, how do you handle notes, and how do you present a bibliography?
4. They argued that creating a signed text is very time consuming.

As with the deaf Irish academics, deaf Flemish academics pointed out that they like being able to present in a signed language, e.g., at conferences. These informants also referred to the *Deaf Studies Digital Journal*[9] and acknowledged the important role that that journal may play in further developing academic registers in signed languages.

Kusters, De Meulder & O'Brien (2017: 32), who discuss deaf scholars' positions in academic settings, note the following:

> "Publication in signed languages (such as in the online Deaf Studies Digital Journal or on DVD published by Ishara Press) are not always the solution, because even those deaf scholars who are fluent in sign languages do not always master and often have not been trained in using the appropriate academic register. Furthermore, the academic impact of these appearances is lower than for printed journals (...). In addition, publishing in English is necessary in order to contribute to other disciplines."

And yet, especially with a view to getting information across to Deaf communities, dissemination in a signed language remains important.

5. Conclusion

Signed language linguistics is still a young field of study, with the start of modern signed language linguistics happening only about fifty years ago. Looking back on the past decades clearly shows that the field has travelled an important distance in a relatively short period of time. In this introduction we explained that early research often focused on demonstrating that signed languages were

9 The Deaf Studies Digital Journal is published by Gallaudet University, the first issue appeared in 2009.

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indeed full, complex, independent languages. Such studies emphasised the similarities between signed and spoken languages, on the one hand, and the differences between signed languages and gesture on the other. In later years, research has turned more towards the modality-specific properties of signed languages, comparing different (related and unrelated) signed languages, and there has also been an increasing interest in comparing aspects of signed languages to gestural aspects of spoken communication. Furthermore, we have pointed out that theoretical developments and advances within the field of spoken language linguistics can also be found in signed language studies. We also showed how new technologies and tools facilitate, for example, the construction of large-scale, machine-readable signed language corpora, which offer opportunities to address new research questions.

Indeed, as more and more signed language corpus data are being annotated, a process that has proven to be extremely labour-intensive, exciting new developments occur. In the near future, we may expect more elaborate linguistic descriptions of individual signed languages, larger-scale socio-linguistic studies, international collaboration in cross-linguistic and typological studies, as well as research and development towards automatic sign recognition and signed language machine translation.

Looking forward, we also expect to see signed language and spoken language research and gesture studies increasingly approaching each other. Today, even though not all linguists are equally convinced of the linguistic status of signed languages, linguistic research into signed languages is a part of many linguistic sub-disciplines. At the same time, it is more and more accepted that the study of gestures will lead to a greater understanding of natural languages and human communication. Gesture researchers and signed language researchers also increasingly meet at workshops and conferences, addressing issues of common interest.

As the division between research on spoken languages, signed languages, and gesture continues to diminish, studying human communication and interaction from a multi-modal perspective may lead to important new insights within the field of linguistics, facilitating a comparative semiotics of diverse language practices (e.g., Enfield, 2009; Kendon, 2014; Green, Kelly & Schembri, 2014; Ferrara & Hodge, 2018). After all, human communication primarily is a multi-modal activity.

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