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The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages

This is an accessible introduction to the major areas of sociolinguistics as they relate to sign languages and Deaf communities. Clearly organized, it brings together a team of leading experts in sign linguistics to survey the field, and covers a wide range of topics including variation, multilingualism, bilingualism, language attitudes, discourse analysis, language policy and planning. The book examines how sign languages are distributed around the world; what occurs when they come in contact with spoken and written languages; and how signers use them in a variety of situations. Each chapter introduces the key issues in each area of inquiry and provides a comprehensive review of the literature. The book also includes suggestions for further reading and helpful exercises.

The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages will be welcomed by students in Deaf studies, linguistics and interpreter training, as well as spoken language researchers, and researchers and teachers of sign languages.

CEIL LUCAS is Professor of Linguistics at Gallaudet University. She is the co-author of *The Linguistics of ASL* and of *Language Contact in the American Deaf Community* (both with Clayton Valli), both published in 1992.

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For Joel Sherzer, who, in 1975,
got me started in sociolinguistics

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and Valli, 1992), of *Sociolinguistic Variation in ASL* (Lucas *et al.*, 2001) and of the videotape *ASL Poetry: Selected Works by Clayton Valli* (Valli, 1995).

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Foreword

Walt Wolfram

No topic within sociolinguistics reflects the growth of the field more symbolically than the study of the sociolinguistics of sign languages. Less than half a century ago, the fundamental debate centered on the rightful place of sign languages with a complete set of linguistic structures and full range of natural language entitlements. Such debates were, of course, framed by the ideology of linguistic subordination, in which difference was equated with deficit and legitimacy was defined by dominance. Happily, but not without continued vigilance, the study of sign languages has now developed a full-course sociolinguistic menu, with ample offerings in all of the major areas of specialization now subsumed under the general rubric of sociolinguistics.

The essays in this collection represent a full complement of sociolinguistic topics, including both macro-variables that relate to broader situations external to the community and micro-variables that focus on specific factors affecting particular language events and interactions. On a macro-level, we witness concern for the distribution and roles of sign languages throughout the world, and the influence of political, economic, social and ideological conditions on their existence. Familiar sociolinguistic topics include issues related to multilingualism, language choice and shift, language policy and planning and language ecology. The issues are at once both basic and complex. On the most fundamental level, we still find the existence of an assumed correlation between sign language and national boundaries and/or spoken-language families manifested in the nomenclature of sign languages: a continuing reflection of a legacy of erroneous assumptions and underlying language ideology about sign languages. On a descriptive level, however, there are complex issues related to documenting the sign languages of the world, sorting out historical and comparative relationships and arriving at valid typological classifications of different sign languages.

On a micro-level, we see increasing attention to interactional sociolinguistics and language variation, two of the most prominent subfields within sociolinguistics. The various dimensions of discourse analysis, for example, seem to come of age in this volume. While there is still a paucity of research on the full range of discourse topics, we have seen an encouraging burst of activity on the

discourse of sign languages in the last decade. This trend bodes well for the future of discourse analysis in the study of sign languages. At the same time, much insight can be gained about the universal basis of discourse construction from a research perspective that focuses on a visual modality vis-à-vis one confined to an oral–aural modality.

The same can be said for the examination of systematic variation in sign languages. Although we may assume that variation in sign languages is sensitive to both internal, linguistic structures and external, social variables, describing and explaining the intersection of these constraints is challenged – and enriched – by comparing specific sign language communities and communities of practice. The analysis of systematic variation in sign languages is, however, hardly immune to ongoing debates about the fundamental components of the sign; these controversies impact the definition of the “linguistic variable” and the determination of the fluctuating variants that comprise its empirical reality. In fact, one of the most exciting aspects of variation analysis set forth in this book is the comparison of the ways in which sign language variation both parallels and contrasts with systematic variability in spoken languages.

In an important, positive sense, this volume reveals the exacting challenge for the sociolinguistics of sign languages: to be informed by the perspective and the insights from general sociolinguistic inquiry and description without being confined to the search for parallels between sociolinguistic situations representing different language modalities. This concern is not meant to denigrate the numerous parallels that certainly exist in the sociolinguistic worlds that affect the global collective of language communities regardless of language modality; nor is it intended to marginalize the examination of the social context in which sign languages are embedded as these situations compare with other sociolinguistic circumstances. My point is simply that we deprive ourselves of comprehensive insight into the human capacity for language, and the social context in which it is embedded, if we do not take full advantage of the rich sociolinguistic resources afforded by research into differential modalities of language expression. Volumes such as this can only enrich the general study of sociolinguistics as well as inform the specific study of sign languages in their social context.

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Preface and acknowledgments

This book grew directly out of my experience in teaching a graduate-level course entitled Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, and out of my frustration at not having one unified self-contained text to use for the course. I have been teaching this course since the early 1980s. When I first taught the course, the readings that pertained specifically to Deaf communities came mostly from work on diglossia by Stokoe, work on variation and language contact by Woodward and others, and work on conversational structure by Baker. All this material was published in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, since the early 1980s, with the ever-growing recognition and acceptance of sign languages as real languages and with the continuing empowerment of deaf people, the field of sign language sociolinguistics has virtually exploded. There is work to report on from all of the major areas of sociolinguistics: multilingualism, bilingualism and language contact, variation, discourse analysis, language planning and policy, language attitudes, and work that reports on Deaf communities all over the world. It is definitely time for a volume such as this one: a text for use in upper-level undergraduate and graduate sociolinguistics courses, a text which will be of interest also to sign language researchers, sociolinguists both deaf and hearing and interested laypersons.

I am very grateful to my co-contributors for their excellent and prompt work and, as a group, we express our deep gratitude to Ms. Jayne McKenzie, Department Secretary for the Department of ASL, Linguistics, and Interpretation at Gallaudet University, who patiently and cheerfully prepared the final manuscript, and to Mrs. Ethylyn DeStefano, Administrative Secretary in the same department, who provided invaluable technical support. We also acknowledge Andrew Winnard, Brenda Burke and Martin Mellor of Cambridge University Press, for their hard work on the volume. We are also grateful to Lois Lehman-Lenderman for the drawings in Chapter 4 and to M. J. Bienvenu for serving as the sign model. Finally, we give a collective and hearty thank you to our families, partners and friends for their support and encouragement.

Abbreviations

AAVE	African American Vernacular English
ASL	American Sign Language
Auslan	Australian Sign Language
BDA	British Deaf Association
BSL	British Sign Language
DASL	Dictionary of American Sign Language
DGS	German Sign Language
FSL	Filipino Sign Language
EUD	European Union of the Deaf
IPSL	Indopakistan Sign Language
ISL	Irish Sign Language
JSL	Japanese Sign Language
LIS	Italian Sign Language
LOVE	Linguistics of Visual English
LSF	French Sign Language
LSQ	Langue des Signes Quebecoise
MCE	Manually Coded English
NAD	National Association of the Deaf (USA)
NCJD	National Congress of Jewish Deaf (USA)
NFSD	National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (USA)
NZSL	New Zealand Sign Language
PSE	Pidgin Sign English
SASL	South African Sign Language
SEE-I	Seeing Essential English
SEE-II	Signing Exact English
SLN	Sign Language of the Netherlands
SSS	sign-supported speech
TSL	Taiwan Sign Language
tty	teletypewriter, a text telephone device
WFD	World Federation of the Deaf