20 Sign Languages in Britain and Ireland

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20.1 British Sign Language

British Sign Language (known as BSL) is the majority language of the British deaf communities, historically related to Auslan (the majority sign language of Australia) and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) (Schembri et al. 2010). BSL also has more distant connections, for example, to some varieties of South African Sign Language, Maltese Sign Language and Maritime Sign Language (in Canada) (Johnston and Schembri 2007). It is not, however, generally considered to be mutually intelligible with sign languages used in other majority English-speaking countries, such as Irish Sign Language (which we discuss below) or American Sign Language (ASL). This is because, like other sign languages, BSL has a vocabulary and grammar that are distinct from those of the surrounding majority spoken language, English. Like many bilingual communities, however, both the vocabulary and the grammar of the British deaf community's sign language reflects considerable language contact with English (Quinto-Pozos and Adam 2015). The term *British Sign Language* appears to have become widely accepted after a 1975 publication by the British linguist Mary Brennan (Brennan 1975). This name and the initialism 'BSL' are both now widely accepted in the British deaf community, although some have also suggested that national sign languages in the constituent countries of the UK also be recognised as separate varieties (e.g. Northern Ireland Sign Language, Scottish Sign Language) (Palfreyman and Schembri 2022). The number of signers in the United Kingdom is not known, although published estimates suggest it may include as many as 125,000 people. The 2021 Census for England and Wales reported that there were 22,000 sign language users in these two countries within the UK, with some 70 per cent of these (i.e. 15,000) explicitly identifying BSL as their primary sign language (Sebba and Turner 2021). BSL is the language of classrooms for deaf children alongside English in the small number of bilingual schools across the country. It is also taught as a university subject at a number of higher education institutions, including the University of Wolverhampton, York St John University and the University of Central Lancashire in England, as well as at

Heriot-Watt University in Scotland. Courses in BSL are also provided by community colleges and private organisations with awarding bodies accredited by the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Some BSL interpreting is regularly provided on British television, and *See Hear*, with deaf presenters using BSL, is a regularly broadcast programme.

The origins of BSL are not known, as relatively few historical descriptions of sign language use exist (Kyle and Woll 1985). Linguists generally assume that BSL is, however, a relatively 'old' sign language when compared to many of the sign languages used elsewhere in the world. The earliest records of sign language use in the UK date back to the fourteenth century, and there is evidence to link modern BSL with signing varieties described in the seventeenth century (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999). The beginning of the modern BSL community, however, probably dates from the opening by Thomas Braidwood in Edinburgh of the first school for deaf children in 1760. Since deaf children are very rarely born to deaf parents who sign, deaf schools play an important role in language transmission for sign languages such as BSL and act as a child's first point of exposure to a large community of signers. Braidwood also opened a school in London in 1792 which would later become the Royal School for Deaf Children Margate. This school closed in 2015, but some historians have suggested that, with its over two hundred years of operation, this represents the beginning of the continuous transmission across the generations of the sign language varieties now known as BSL (Brown 2021). By the early twentieth century, over a hundred schools for the deaf had been established in the UK. Most of these were residential schools, with BSL being passed on, primarily from child to child, in classrooms, playgrounds and dormitories. Adult deaf communities formed in the towns and cities where these schools were located, and soon organisations began to be established to meet their needs. The Royal Association for the Deaf, the oldest charitable organisation for the welfare of deaf adults, opened in 1841, and the British Deaf Association was established in 1890. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many different social, church and sporting groups for deaf British people formed, and the social networks of deaf signers created as a result led to the consolidation of BSL as the language of the UK deaf community.

20.2 Irish Sign Language

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the majority sign language of the Irish deaf community and the third official language of Ireland (Leeson, Saeed and Grehan 2015). It has been suggested that there are over 5,000 deaf signers of ISL in Ireland, with many thousands more hearing signers (Matthews 1996). ISL is also a minority language in the United Kingdom, with some use in

Northern Ireland, Scotland and England by Catholic deaf people. Historically, ISL was also used by some Catholic deaf people in Australia (Adam 2014) and South Africa (Leeson and Saeed 2012). Due to a tradition of educating boys and girls in separate schools, ISL has had significant gender differences in vocabulary, although this has reduced over time (LeMaster and O'Dwyer 1990; Leeson and Grehan 2004).

The first school for deaf children in Ireland was the Claremont Institute, established in 1816. It had links to the Braidwood school in Edinburgh, so it is likely that a sign language variety related to BSL was used as the language of instruction. Many of the children admitted into the school were reported to know some sign language already, so we know that an older variety of ISL was in existence prior to this time (Conama and Leonard 2020).

As the school was Protestant in orientation, schools for Catholic deaf children were established in 1846 and 1857 (McDonnell 1979). The language of instruction was influenced by French Sign Language (LSF) (due to some links with the Le Bon Saveur school for deaf children in Caen), as well as BSL and existing sign varieties in Ireland. While our understanding of ISL is growing, especially after the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin in 2001, there are many linguistic features and sociolinguistic contexts of ISL use that remain underexplored.

20.3 Structure of BSL and ISL: Phonology and the Lexicon

BSL and ISL share similar structural properties with other sign languages in their phonological, morphological, syntactic and discourse organisation (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; Leeson and Saeed 2012). Signs can be analysed into smaller recurring sublexical features, and these contrastive features are combined and recombined to build the vocabulary of the language (Fenlon, Cormier and Brentari 2017). The formational features can be modified meaningfully and assembled into clauses in rule-governed ways. Clauses are organised systematically in distinct ways into larger units of discourse, such as personal experience narratives or expository lectures. Also, like other sign languages, BSL and ISL also have features of their organisation that differ from those found in spoken languages, such as the grammatical use of space around the signer's body.

BSL and ISL signs contrast in meaning using the same four manual parameters first identified by ASL linguists in the 1960s and 1970s, together with non-manual features (Brennan et al. 1984; Brien 1992; Leeson and Saeed 2012). The distinctive features are (1) handshape (the configuration of the hand created by different combinations of finger extension, finger spread and bending at the joints), (2) location (the place on or near the body where the sign is produced), (3) orientation (the direction of the fingers and palm of the

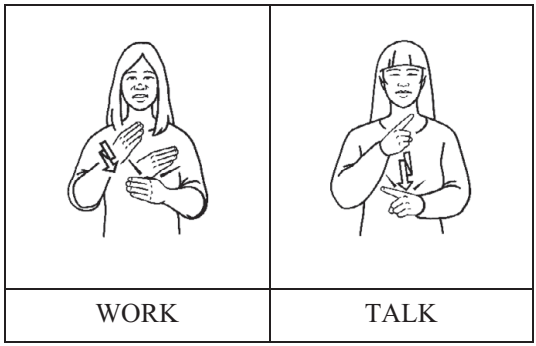

Figure 20.1 BSL signs contrasting in handshape.
Source: T. Johnston and A. Schembri, A. (2007). *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An Introduction to Sign Language Linguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 83. Reproduced with permission from Cambridge University Press.

hand), (4) movement (the motion made when producing the sign) and (5) non-manual features, including facial expression, movements of the head and body, and mouth actions. Examples of BSL signs contrasting in handshape include WORK versus TALK (see Figure 20.1): the former sign is made with a flat handshape, while the latter uses an extended index finger handshape. In all other respects, the manual features of the signs are identical: the dominant hand makes two small downward movements, contacting the radial side of the subordinate hand with its ulnar side. An ISL example is KNOW and UNDERSTAND – these also contrast in handshape, with the former made with a flat handshape contacting the side of the head, while a handshape with two fingers extended and held together is found in the latter (Leeson and Saeed, 2012). Brennan et al. (1984) demonstrated that BSL uses a limited set of around thirty-five distinctive handshapes, although many of these also have variant forms. This variation in phonological parameters is often conditioned by the phonological context. BSL studies have shown, for example, that signs produced with an extended index finger handshape in citation form, such as the sign ME or THINK, may be produced with co-occurring thumb or little finger extension when they precede or follow another sign using a handshape that also has an extended thumb or little finger (Fenlon et al. 2013). As noted above, signs in ISL and BSL are also accompanied by a range of non-manual features, including mouth gestures or the silent mouthing of English words (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; Mohr 2014). Research indicates that there is variation in the use of mouth actions in BSL and ISL signers (Proctor and Cormier 2023; Fitzgerald 2014), although it is clear that mouthing plays a vital role in comprehension (Stamp 2016; Rowley and Cormier 2021).

Signs in the BSL and ISL lexicon can be categorised into three major types (Cormier, Tyrone and Schembri 2008; Leeson and Saeed 2012). First, lexical signs are relatively more fixed in form, such as BSL SISTER or HAVE, with a specific meaning associated with a specific combination of handshape, orientation, movement and location. These BSL signs may sometimes be arbitrary, with little discernible link between the sign's form and its meaning (e.g. the signs BROTHER, FALSE or EXPECT), or they may be iconic, with some relationship between the form of the sign and its meaning (e.g. DRINK, RUN or HOUSE) (Vinson et al. 2008). Second, depicting signs (also known as classifier signs), such as VEHICLE-MOVE or CIRCULAR-SHAPED-OBJECT, are consistently iconic, however. As a result, they vary in form, depending on specific contexts, and can be used to produce a wide range of meanings. Third, fingerspelled forms use signs to represent individual letters of the Roman alphabet and are used to spell out words borrowed from written English, such as the names of people, and proper nouns for animals, objects and places (Sutton-Spence 1999). In BSL, a two-handed fingerspelling alphabet is used, while ISL uses a one-handed manual alphabet (Leeson et al. 2020).

20.4 Structure of BSL and ISL: Morphology and Syntax

Both BSL and ISL morphology involve the potential for significant grammatical modification of lexical signs (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; Leeson and Saeed 2012). Reduplication of some nouns (e.g. CHILD), for example, is an optional means of indicating plurality (e.g. CHILDREN). Some noun signs, such as signs WEEK, YESTERDAY and TOMORROW, use numeral incorporation – where the '1' handshape in the citation form can be replaced by the handshape from the number signs TWO or THREE to signal 'two weeks' or 'in three days from now'. Reduplication of verb signs is a means of signalling aspectual meanings, such as iterative (e.g. GO-REGULARLY) or continuative aspect (e.g. WAIT-A-LONG-TIME). Note that tense is not marked morphologically in either BSL or ISL but is indicated instead by separate temporal adverbial signs. Completive aspect is marked by an auxiliary sign FINISH, which may occur before or after the main verb. Indicating (or 'agreement') verbs may be directed towards the location of referents which are physically present, or towards locations associated with absent referents. This directionality is used to signal subject and object arguments of the verb (i.e. who does what to whom). Research on BSL indicates that this process is optional (Fenlon, Schembri and Cormier 2018), although influenced by a number of factors, such as co-reference, definiteness and animacy. Depicting (or 'classifier') verbs may include a variety of handshapes which represent different classes of entity and are used to show the location and motion of referents. Other depicting signs include a variety of different handshapes to represent the

handling of objects, and others use various combinations of handshape and movement that show relative size and shape of referents.

BSL and ISL syntax appears to be somewhat flexible. Although subject-verb-object word order might be used to distinguish between subject and object arguments in both languages, various alternative constituent orders are possible (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; Leeson and Saeed 2012). Indicating and depicting verbs can include information about the relevant subject and/or object argument by the incorporation of directionality or the appropriate classifier handshape, and this makes the presence of a noun or pronoun unnecessary. In such cases, sentences may consist of a verb only. Moreover, the use of constructed action, in which the signer uses their body to re-enact the actions of some person (Cormier, Smith and Zwets 2013), also allows the subject or object argument to be understood from context. Furthermore, simultaneous constructions, with each hand signing different constituents at the same time, are also possible (Leeson and Saeed 2007, 2012, 2020). Non-manual features are used to distinguish sentence types: raised eyebrows often accompany yes/no questions, and furrowed brows may signal a *wh*-question. An emphatic declarative might be accompanied by head nods, and a negated statement by a headshake (as well as by manual negation signs, like NOT or NEVER).

20.5 Sociolinguistics of BSL and ISL

BSL exhibits considerable sociolinguistic variation (Schembri et al. 2010). Unlike regional accents in British English, however, the differences mostly appear to consist of variation in vocabulary items (Stamp et al. 2014). Significant lexical differences appear to be between the varieties used in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, as well as within each of these four countries. This is particularly true of some semantic domains, such as signs for colours and numbers, place names for cities in the UK, and signs for other countries. For example, within England, place-name signs clearly mark local identity, with the signs BIRMINGHAM, MANCHESTER and NEWCASTLE differing depending on whether you live in or outside these urban centres. Traditional signs SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT and NINE also differ in London, Bristol and Manchester: SIX in London is represented by a thumb extended from the fist and bent at the middle joint, in Bristol by an extended little finger, and in Manchester by a two-handed sign in which the dominant-hand index finger is placed on the subordinate fist. Much of this traditional variation is changing, however, with studies indicating that younger signers use fewer of these traditional regional variants, and instead adopt more widely recognised signs, such as those used in larger cities such as London. Given the closure of many residential schools for deaf children (which appear to be the sources of the

regional variation across the UK), and increasing mainstreaming of deaf children with their hearing peers, many of the established forms of transmission of the language in the residential school playground and dormitory have changed.

There is some evidence of regional variation in ISL as well, with the Mid-West region of Ireland using a distinct variety (Conama 2008), and usage in Northern Ireland varying from that in the Republic (Leeson and Saeed 2012), but this has not yet been the focus of systematic study. This contrasts with gender variation resulting from segregated schooling for boys and girls, which was the focus of a number of specific studies. For example, LeMaster and O'Dwyer (1990) analysed 106 different male and female signs and found that 63 per cent of the signs were related to each other in some way, with the remainder unrelated. LeMaster (2002) evaluated semantic lists for gender variation and demonstrated the occurrence of variation across all lexical categories analysed, including, for example, GIRL (noun), WORK (verb) and YELLOW (adjective). Leeson and Grehan (2004) report that while the widespread lexical differences described by LeMaster were specific to an older generation of signers, and thus are not generally used by younger signers, contemporary signers have another lexicon of gendered signs which originated in the segregated schools for the deaf in Cabra. That is, gendered signing continues to be found in the Irish deaf community but it is more reduced than in previous generations.

20.6 Sign Language Research in Britain and Ireland: Descriptive and Applied Linguistics

Research on the linguistics of BSL began in the 1970s, with the first books on the language appearing in the 1980s (Brennan et al. 1984; Deuchar 1984; Kyle and Woll 1985). The first documentation of ISL formed part of a language planning exercise, resulting in the publication of a 1979 *Dictionary of Irish Sign Language* (National Association for the Deaf 1979). The first edition of a BSL dictionary organised according to linguistic principles was published in 1992 (Brien 1992). In 2008, work on creating a corpus (i.e. an online searchable collection of language data) for BSL began (Schembri et al. 2013), while the Signs of Ireland ISL Corpus began in 2004 (Leeson and Saeed 2012). In 2014, an online dictionary based on the BSL corpus data, known as BSL SignBank, became available (Fenlon et al. 2014). The BSL and ISL corpora have provided data for doctoral dissertations, publications and research projects on aspects of the structure and use of the grammar of both sign languages and they will serve as permanent records of the languages as used in the early twenty-first century.

In addition to this work on language description, there has been a lot of recent research into language ideologies surrounding BSL and other sign languages (Kusters et al. 2020). Language planning and language use are

largely driven by language ideologies. BSL is an unwritten minority language and one produced in the visual-gestural modality, thus historically, much of the ideology surrounding BSL has been negative. While now the tides seem to be turning, there are still many misconceptions about BSL, all of which have an impact on its structure, vocabulary and use. As Steiner (1998) so aptly put it, 'language oppression is not embedded long ago in the history of deaf people; it is an ongoing, constant social reality'.

Changes in BSL and ISL over time, since the dawn of deaf education, have largely been influenced by changes in educational policies. For example, prior to the 1950s, the fingerspelling method, which is communicating by spelling out English words and sentences in their entirety, was widely used in deaf education. This method died out in favour of other methods such as the oral method, educating deaf children via spoken language only, and total communication, the combination of speech and signs (following an English word order). These changes are evident amongst BSL and ISL signers, where you see fingerspelling being used more frequently by older signers compared to younger signers (Brown and Cormier 2017), and in Ireland more frequently by older male signers (Leeson and Saeed 2012). Research looking at the use of fingerspelling amongst *See Hear* presenters, a British deaf magazine television programme, between the years of 1981 and 1990 shows a steady decline in the use of fingerspelling (Sutton-Spence, Woll and Allsop 1990).

In the late 1970s, it emerged that British policies surrounding raising and educating deaf children (i.e. advice given to parents of deaf children and communication methods used in schools) were failing. On average, UK deaf sixteen-year-olds were leaving school with a reading age equivalent to nine-year-old hearing children (Conrad 1979). This sparked yet another change in policy, moving towards a more total communication approach (i.e. using both spoken and signed languages). As most deaf children are born to hearing parents, deaf schools are seen as a repository for BSL, where it can be transmitted horizontally, from peer to peer, as well as by intergenerational transmission, picking up signs from deaf educators (De Meulder and Murray 2017). Unfortunately, in 1978, in a report commissioned by the British Government, Baroness Warnock recommended that deaf and disabled children be taught in mainstream schools (Warnock 1978). This was due to a push from disability groups who wanted a more inclusive approach to education. Deaf lobbyists argued that education needed to be different for deaf children as they were a cultural and linguistic minority who would struggle to have full access to mainstream education. This move cut off the transmission of BSL (Ladd 2003). Currently, 78 per cent of severely and profoundly deaf children attend mainstream schools with no specialist provision, 6 per cent have some specialist support and only 3 per cent now attend deaf schools (Consortium for Research on Deaf Education 2019).

BSL signers recognise that changes in BSL are intertwined with educational policy. For example, BSL signers believe that regional variation in BSL is linked to where deaf schools were based in the past (Rowley and Cormier 2021). Quinn (2010) called this process 'schoolisation', where regional variation in BSL was largely driven by deaf individuals who attended school. Signers believe that current educational policies threaten the vitality of BSL and that mainstream education has had a devastating impact on the lives of deaf people (Rowley and Cormier 2023). BSL signers place enormous value on BSL, even those who did not grow up signing, and current policies do not reflect that value. Many, if not all, of those policies have been determined by hearing educators, with little or no input from BSL signers or members of deaf communities (Ladd 2003).

Despite barriers and difficulties within education, BSL has flourished in other areas. There has been a large increase of BSL in the media since the establishment of *See Hear* in 1981. There are many sign language programmes available on channels such as BSL Zone, and many programmes, including BBC News, are interpreted into BSL. There is also a presence of deaf actors using BSL on mainstream television programmes, such as Rose Ayling-Ellis, who plays Frankie in *EastEnders* and who went on to win BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*. In addition to the increased profile of BSL, a bill on BSL recognition was passed by the Scottish Government in 2015 and Scotland now has a BSL Act. This means that deaf BSL signers have a legal right to access public services in BSL across Scotland (De Meulder 2015). In 2022, the UK Government also passed a BSL Act. Interestingly, many of those positive changes have come from within deaf communities, who have actively campaigned for increased access and for the recognition of sign languages (De Meulder and Murray 2017).

The increased visibility of BSL and ISL on mainstream television over the years and the government recognition of BSL and ISL as community languages has instilled pride in deaf signers in Britain and Ireland. In the past, older signers experienced language shaming and did not feel comfortable signing in public places (Kyle and Woll 1985). It has also encouraged many hearing people to learn BSL and ISL. While this is a positive change, it does have its downside. The number of hearing learners of BSL now outnumbers deaf signers. This has implications on how BSL evolves as a language, as hearing learners of BSL with highly variable levels of fluency are often the only signing role models deaf children have in mainstream schools. This is seen as a threat to the vitality of BSL, with BSL signers questioning the authenticity and validity of some BSL signs, which is not unlike other minority languages such as Irish, where second language learners now outnumber native speakers of Irish (Rowley and Cormier 2023; Nic Fhlannchadha and Hickey 2018).

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