

Introduction

This issue of the Learning Communities Journal emerged from a workshop on Indigenous sign languages research, the first of its kind held at the Charles Darwin University in July 2013. The workshop focused on a variety of issues related to sign languages, within and outside of Australia. The contributions outside of Australia deal with the Indigenous sign languages of Thailand, Ban Khor, and Indonesia, Desa Kolok. These two Indigenous sign languages give us some insight into communities in the region and are especially interesting when keeping in mind the longstanding contact between these countries and Australia.

This workshop was designed to raise awareness of the general public on the existence of Indigenous sign languages and as such, aimed at establishing a first dialogue between sign languages scholars, community members, educators, sign language interpreters, policy makers, and the public. Too often people have overlooked the signs used by Aboriginal people in the street, misinterpreted these signs as some arbitrary gestures, or even simply ignored the existence of these Indigenous sign languages. Further, there has recently been a spate of publications concerned with the documentation of sign languages in different parts of the world, as well as a growing interest in various types of sign languages within the field of Sign Linguistics. This workshop can be regarded as a contribution to this development in the field.

The first paper is from Adam Kendon, a pioneer of Indigenous sign languages of Australia. Kendon gives a brief survey of the characteristics of sign languages in use among Indigenous Australians, mainly as these are described in his book *Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia* (1988), with indications for what appear to be some of the important questions that still need to be explored.

In the second paper, Elaine Maypilama and Dany Adone take a close look at the sign languages in use in certain communities of Arnhem Land. Following Kendon, they argue these sign languages are alternate languages used by the hearing population. Although these languages have been used for a long time as alternatives to speech under special circumstances, they are used nowadays in multiple contexts on a daily basis. At the same time, these sign languages function as the primary languages of the few Deaf people in these communities. Here the authors discuss some shared similarities among these alternate sign languages of Arnhem Land, giving the reader some insights into the sociolinguistics of these alternate signing systems. With the brief discussion on some characteristics of these sign language, the authors hope to have provided some understanding on the nature of alternate signing systems.

In paper three, Margaret Carew and Jenny Green discuss a sign language documentation and online resource development project for Indigenous sign languages from Central Australia. In particular, they track their workflow through from sign recording sessions to the publication of selected clips in the online sign language dictionary, www.iltyemiltyem.com/sign/. They analyse the various requirements of media publishing in environments typical of remote Central Australia, focussing on two distinct paths – one is primarily a film editing workflow and the other more suited to presenting media and metadata online. The paper discusses the challenges of working in a multilingual and multimodal environment for the design of sign language corpora and resources. Furthermore, Carew and Green draw attention to multiple outcomes from language documentation – materials presented through a range of media, resources relevant to academic and community audiences, curated archival data sets and refined corpora that enable further research.

Paper four is from Suzannah Jackson. Although the author could not join us at the workshop she was able to contribute to this special edition. Jackson takes a look at what she calls Indigenous Sign Language (ISL) which is a signed language used among communities of Deaf and hearing people in Far North Queensland (FNQ). To date, there has been little investigation into both the origins and morphological features of ISL. In this paper, some preliminary evidence suggests a link between modern day ISL and traditional Australian Aboriginal Sign Languages (AASLs). The paper discusses the idea that ISL may be comprised of several AASL contact languages and the users of the language, who originate from a range of remote Indigenous communities throughout FNQ, have progressed its morphology.

In paper five, Andy Butcher looks at some possible explanations for the origin of sign languages in Aboriginal Australia. It is well known there are a number of communities scattered around the world where hearing individuals routinely use sign language. Such communities are, without exception, culturally or geographically isolated and have a high proportion of profoundly deaf members. The sign languages of Australia's Aboriginal population appear to be unique in that almost every Indigenous community may have had its own alternate sign language, understood by all the population and used by the majority. The possible role of hearing impairment in the emergence and the maintenance of these languages has been largely ignored, as there is no evidence the proportion of profoundly deaf individuals is any higher in the Aboriginal population than in the population as a whole. Instead, the factors most commonly cited are ceremonial speech taboo, silent communication during hunting and the need for a lingua franca in a multilingual society. However, chronic *otitis media* with effusion (OME) develops in almost all Aboriginal infants within a few weeks of birth, leaving up to 80% of Aboriginal children with a mild to moderate conductive hearing loss. It is suggested that such a widely distributed population characteristic may have had an influence on the development of these unique alternate communication systems.

In paper six, Gede Marsaja presents his work on a small and isolated village in North Bali (Indonesia) in which Deaf and hearing people have lived together in a single community for many generations. In the local area, the village is popularly known as *Desa Kolok* (Deaf Village) due to its hereditary Deaf population. The article describes the life and the roles of the Deaf people in the village's community. The article discusses how the Deaf people in the village have been fully assimilated into the mainstream hearing community through a number of well-established social and cultural networks and activities that accommodate all aspects of the Deaf people's life and culture. The assimilation also involves widespread use of sign language, not only among the members of the Deaf families but also among the majority of the people from the non-Deaf families. Not less than two thirds of the hearing population was found to have used sign language regularly due to frequent contact with Deaf in the village.

In paper seven, Angela Nonaka deals with Ban Khor Sign Language (BKSL) which is a rare language variety known as a 'village' or 'Indigenous' sign language. This type of sign language develops in small face-to-face communities where historically there are/were: 1) demographically significant numbers of deaf people in the population; 2) high degrees of real or fictive kin relatedness among community members; 3) low levels of educational differentiation between deaf and hearing residents; 4) non-industrial, labour-intensive local economies; and 5) low degrees of occupational differentiation between deaf and hearing villagers. The most striking characteristics of the language ecologies of signing village communities, however, involve their local language ideologies and practices. In such communities, there are no sign language interpreters. Instead, it is common not only for deaf people but also for hearing residents to acquire and use the village sign language. Because it is widely used by both deaf and hearing people in the course of everyday life, the village sign language facilitates the inclusion (vs. exclusion) of deaf members of the community.

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Professor Dany Adone
Guest Editor