Toponyms in Ban Khor Sign Language

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Introduction

Ban Khor Sign Language (BKSL) is a rare language variety known as a ‘village’ (Zeshan 2004) or ‘indigenous’ (Woodward 2000) 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, labor-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.


In anthropological linguistics, there is a robust literature on onomastics—the study of the origin and forms of proper names (personal, place, brand, etc.). Names are interesting and useful phenomena for linguistic and cultural analysis because naming systems and practices mirror and order the social world.

This article provides first-pass description of ‘toponyms,’ or place names, in Ban Khor Sign Language. The paper’s primary aim is to explicate the linguistic organization and underlying

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1. The actual numbers of deaf people vary considerably in the communities where village sign languages have developed, ranging from a small handful to many hundreds. Statistically, however, the numbers are significant, exceeding the scientifically established percentage of 1/1,000 individuals expected to be born deaf (Reardon et al. 2004, p.8).
cultural logic of BKSL toponyms, which reflect and instantiate their social environment of origin and use. Additionally, this case study offers interesting and immediate insights into matters of linguistic etymology, lexical conventionalization, and historical linguistic change. Research on proper place names usually centers on older languages and is strongly historical, that is, it typically traces existing onomastic forms, over long periods of time, back to their etymological origins. BKSL, however, is a young language, just 8–10 decades old. Examination of this indigenous, village sign language offers a rare glimpse into the contemporary descriptive derivations and development of an incipient place name system. Recently, especially within the last 5 years, Ban Khor Sign Language’s toponymic onomastic system has begun to alter; and those changes are considered here vis-à-vis issues of language contact, shift, and endangerment.

Onomastic Research and Signed Languages

Onomastic research on signed languages has predominantly focused on personal name signs (Meadow 1977; Baker-Shenk 1987; Yau & He 1987a, 1989; Supalla 1990, 1992; Mindess 1990; Hedberg 1991, 1994; Desrosiers & Dubuisson 1994; Machabee 1995; Yau 1996; McKee & McKee 2000; McKee et. al 2000; Delaporte 2001; Strauss-Samaneh 2001; Kourbetis & Hoffmeister 2002; Nyst & Baker 2003; McNamara 2003; Rainò 2005; Van Mulders 2005; Day & Sutton-Spence 2010; Chen 2007; Mackevicius 2010; Paales 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Esipova 2013; Nonaka et. al [in press]; Leeson & Saeed [forthcoming]). By contrast, there are only a handful of studies of place names in sign languages (Paales 2002; Yau & He 1987b; Peng & Clouse 1977). Thus, there is no working model or established typology of toponymic onomastics in manual-visual languages.

Preliminary comparative examination of dictionary data from ‘national’ (Woodward 2000) or ‘urban’ (Zeshan 2004) sign languages, however, reveals some striking differences between place names in those languages and in BKSL. As the examples in Figure 1 illustrate, place names in American Sign Language (ASL), Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN) and Thai Sign Language (TSL) differ from each other. Yet their respective toponymic systems exhibit basic similarities when compared to Ban Khor’s indigenous sign language. AUSLAN (Johnston 1998), ASL (Humphries et al. 1985), and TSL (Suwanarat et al. 1990) all have:

1. robust place name vocabularies for both domestic and international locations
2. orthographically influenced signs—i.e., ones that are either initialized (made using one or more letters of the manual alphabet) or fingerspelled entirely
   a. Example 1: Initialized sign C for Canberra in AUSLAN
   b. Example 2: Initialized sign W for Washington, DC in ASL
   c. Example 3: Initialized sign T for Tak in TSL
3. predominantly mono-lexemic toponymic onomastic systems
4. at least some “descriptive” signs (Supalla 1990, 1992)—i.e., ones etymologically derived from something (physical, habitual, idiosyncratic, historical, etc.) distinctive or famous about the place
   a. Examples 1: AUSTRALIA, in both Australian and Thai sign languages, depicts a ‘hopping’ movement reminiscent of a kangaroo, an animal species unique to the country
   b. Example 2: CALIFORNIA, also the sign for GOLD, relates to the California Gold Rush

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2. A search, using the keyword “names,” of the online International Bibliography of Sign Language revealed only three studies of place names in signed languages: Peng & Clouse, 1977; Yau & He, 1987; and Paales, 2002. No other studies were found either via searches of Google and the EBSCO database or in the indexes of any major English-language journals dedicated to research on onomastics or signed languages.
**Figure 1:** Examples of Toponyms in Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN), American Sign Language (ASL), and Thai Sign Language (TSL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUSLAN</th>
<th>ASL</th>
<th>TSL</th>
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<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANBERRA*</td>
<td>WASHINGTON D.C.*</td>
<td>BANGKOK (a.k.a Khrungthep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARWIN</td>
<td>CALIFORNIA</td>
<td>TAK*</td>
</tr>
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* asterisk symbol indicates an initialized sign

Place names in Ban Khor Sign Language, by contrast, constitute a relatively small subset of the language’s total vocabulary and are uninfluenced by the orthography of written Thai. BKSL toponyms are non-mono-lexemic. They consist of a string of (quasi-)descriptive signs, ending
with a deictic specifier—i.e., HERE, THERE, WAY-OVER-THERE. The final deictic specifier is a point, prototypically made with the index finger and is a true directional or absolute point (Levinson 2003) that indexes the actual location as well as the relative distance (nearness or farness) of the place vis-à-vis the speaker and Ban Khor.

Interwoven with this basic linguistic organization is an underlying cultural logic that reflects and (re)instantiates the particular milieu in which BKSL developed and has been used. Place names in the language are locally and experientially anchored and can be divided into two basic, dichotomous domains: Ban Khor and non-Ban Khor. A distinct set of ideological and affective experiences and projections is associated with each domain. As the following analysis illustrates, this is the basic cognitive map that orients and structures the toponymic onomastic system in Ban Khor Sign Language.

Analysis of BKSL's Toponymic Onomastic System

Ban Khor is the name of both a village (spanning just 1.8 square miles and administratively divided into four contiguous sub-villages) and a sub-district (consisting of 10 distinct villages, including its namesake). In both Thai and Nyoh (the two main spoken languages used in the multilingual area), ban means both ‘home’ and ‘village’. Drawn from the name of the community’s founder, Khun Khor, the word khor is a Nyoh word for a traditional wooden clacker put around the necks of water buffalo.

Exhibiting no relationship to either written Thai or to any spoken language used in the community, the place name for Ban Khor in BKSL is _______________ AREA _______________ (here) I/MY _______________ AREA _______________ (here). The basic gloss is the same for the sub-village, village, and sub-district. Yet as the examples in Figure 2 show, the three administrative units are clearly distinguished by size and intensity of signing.

3. The final points of most BKSL toponyms typically are made using the index finger of the dominant signing hand, although other forms of pointing—i.e., with the hand, the mouth and/or head—can be and sometimes are used.

4. The data upon which this study is based was collected over the course of 12 years using three distinct but complementary methods. In 2002, as part of general lexical elicitation, BKSL toponyms were collected from 10 fluent, hearing BKSL signers using a written list of place names read aloud. The 110-word elicitation list included the names of all of the villages comprising Ban Khor sub-district; the immediate and surrounding district towns; the national capital of Bangkok; all Thai provinces; neighbouring Southeast Asian countries; and a few foreign countries in Asia and the West. In 2008 more in-depth research on toponyms in BKSL was conducted with 20 fluent signers, both hearing and Deaf. The same 110-word research protocol that was used in 2002 was adapted so that Deaf Ban Khorians (most of whom cannot read) could participate in the study. Again, hearing participants listened to the 110-word list of place names read aloud and then demonstrated the corresponding signs in BKSL. Deaf participants were shown a large map with iconic photos of all of the villages comprising: 1) Ban Khor sub-district; 2) the immediate and surrounding district towns; and 3) the two closest provincial capital cities. Deaf research consultants signed the name of the place depicted on the map in BKSL. Additionally, all participants, regardless of audiological status, were interviewed by a local research assistant who used a standardized questionnaire to gather background information about their travel routines and experiences. With Deaf consultants, this was another means of eliciting BKSL toponyms at the sub-district and district levels as well as a few signs for other provinces and foreign countries.

The 2008 research project was specifically designed to test the hypothesis that the final deictic points in BKSL toponyms are absolute points. This was tested in two ways. Research was conducted and filmed at different sites in Ban Khor village. Additionally, at the two sites where most of the research filming took place, research tasks were intentionally arranged so that consultants had to sit or stand facing different directions while performing the tasks.

In all cases and regardless of audiological status, research consultants pointed in the actual direction of the place for which they were demonstrating the BKSL sign.

The third and final type of data involves lexical tokens of toponyms drawn from hundreds of hours of naturalistic conversational data in the target language. These data were gathered in the course of long-term participant-observation ethnographic research conducted between 2000–2012. Whenever possible, spontaneous examples of BKSL toponyms were compared with the elicited place names, yielding findings that were consistent with the ones being reported herein.
Figure 2: BKSL Sign(s) for Ban Khor

Figure 2a: BAN KHOR Sub-village

Figure 2b: BAN KHOR Village
Figure 2c: BAN KHOR Sub-district

(area)

(area) (here) I/MY

(area) (here)
To articulate *Ban Khor*, the sub-village (Figure 2a), the signer utilizes the most circumscribed arc of spatial articulation for AREA. The arm is moderately extended and forms an arc closing very near the head as the hand drops in front of the forehead. In addition, I/MY is articulated directly on the chest, with the body drawn inward slightly upon contact with the hand, iconically representing a closeness to the speaker.

*Ban Khor* village (Figure 2b) is more expansive. AREA is articulated more distantly from the body. The arm is thrust forward with the fingers fully extended away from the body, the torque of which itself conveys distance. The falling arc of the arm begins higher above the head, and the hand drops a distance in front of the body (rather than immediately in front of the forehead as in the preceding figure). I/MY is again articulated directly on the chest, but the chest is erect (rather than drawn inward) indicating a more expansive, less interior relation to the speaker.

When signing *Ban Khor* sub-district (Figure 2c), the tendencies toward extension and expansion are even more exaggerated. AREA is now articulated in a space so large that the hand and wrist of the dominant signing hand sometimes exceed the limits of the camera's lens. Production of I/MY is markedly different too. In the previous examples the palm of the signer's hand makes full contact with and briefly rests on the chest. In this instance, however, I/MY is expressed with just the fingertips, which briefly graze the chest as the hand continues along its articular arc, suggesting a lesser degree of immediacy/possession vis-à-vis the speaker.

Non-manual linguistic features—i.e., facial expressions, mouthings, eye gaze, etc.—also distinguish the different *Ban Khors*. Notably, the most positive facial expression (e.g., relaxed face and smile) accompanying the signs I/MY and AREA is associated with *Ban Khor* sub-village (Figure 2a). To express *Ban Khor* village (Figure 2b), the lips are pursed in a manner similar to the mouthing *phoo*, a Nyoh word meaning ‘there’ or ‘over there’ that has been grammaticized in BKSL and that typically accompanies the signs THERE or OVER THERE, which are expressed as deictic points. In this case, however, the phoo mouthing along with slightly scrunched eyebrows and slightly distant eye gaze combine to indicate the larger administrative unit and more distant HERE. The non-manual markers that distinguish Ban Khor sub-district (Figure 2c) are two-fold: 1) even more distant eye gaze and highly raised and spread eyebrows, both suggesting still greater spaciousness, and 2) puffed cheeks, a facial expression of largeness or importance accompanying other signs like BIG or VILLAGE HEADMAN (Nonaka 2007, p.75).

*Ban Khor’s* nested organization (sub-village, village and sub-district) is at the geographical and experiential center of BKSL speakers’ cognitive map (see Figure 3a). Other places are concentrically arranged outward at ever-greater distances to the periphery—i.e., other villages in the sub-district; the district capital; neighbouring (sub-)districts; the provincial capital; and other national and international places (Figure 3b).
Figure 3: The Areal, Experiential, Affective, and Linguistic Organization of BKSL’s Toponymic Onomastic System

Figure 3a: BKSL Signers’ Cognitive Map

Figure 3b: Contrasting Areal Domains of Ban Khor vs. Non-Ban Khor
Since the community’s founding in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century, most villagers spent their entire lives in *Ban Khor*. Travel outside of the village and sub-district was rare, except for occasional trips to the district and provincial capitals and to those of the neighbouring district and province. In the 1980s it was uncommon but not unknown for villagers to leave the village for extended periods to work, primarily in Bangkok but occasionally in foreign countries in East Asia or the Middle East. By the 1990s greater numbers of *Ban Khorians* began traveling together to work an annual migrant labor circuit in Thailand. In the 21st century, especially within the last half-decade, those patterns have intensified dramatically, with many more villagers traveling frequently to more locations within the sub-district, district, province as well as to other parts of Thailand (Nonaka 2012a, p.289-90). These patterns provide important information for understanding the shared cognitive map undergirding toponyms in *Ban Khor* Sign Language.

Places are not only experientially but also affectively divided (Figure 3c) into the two basic domains of *Ban Khor* (and other relatively near and directly experienced locations at the sub-district, district, and home provincial levels) and non-*Ban Khor*. The first domain, *Ban Khor*, is associated with concepts such as: here, near, and local, with a strong positive implication of being safe, comfortable, clean, and so forth. The non-*Ban Khor* domain conveys contrastive notions associated with the ‘Other’, such as: outside the village, there (elsewhere), distant, far, and non-local (e.g., a distance so great it requires difficult and bothersome vehicular travel or
overnight stay outside the village), and implies an unknown that is often negative (e.g. scary, dangerous, crowded, dirty). Notably, similar affective mapping has been ethnographically documented in other small Thai village communities in northeastern Thailand (Mizuno 1971).5

Compared to written Thai, to any of the spoken languages used in the community, and to Thai Sign Language, BKSL’s toponymic lexicon is small. Unnamed places—ones without a name sign—are generically designated as GO (WAY) OVER-THERE (Figure 3d). In such cases, the actual and/or affective distance from the speaker and from Ban Khor is indexed both by the size and intensity of the articulated sign and by the volume and degree of aspiration of the accompanying mouthings bai (‘go’) or phoo (‘there’ or ‘over there’).

Linguistically, BKSL toponyms have developed independently of other languages in the community. Thai village names follow a predictable form: ban (‘village’) + _____ [usually 1~2 words]. In BKSL, however, place names consist of a string of (quasi-) descriptive signs ending with a final, true directional or absolute point. This basic constructional pattern characterizes the signed toponyms for all other villages in Ban Khor sub-district. As the next two examples make clear, BKSL place name signs are unrelated to and exhibit very little, if any, influence from written or spoken Thai or any other language of the community.

Ban Khwang Klii (‘ball game’)6 is a neighbouring village. In BKSL, however, the place name traditionally has been signed: SHOUT HIT-on-the-HEAD OVER THERE, the final point always toward the actual location (Figure 4a). Unrelated to the Thai name, the signed one is derived from a locally infamous incident: a party turned drunken brawl in which a man was hit over the head with a bottle. During the last decade it has become increasingly common for this toponym simply to be signed HIT-on-the-HEAD OVER THERE (Figure 4b). This type of shortening is associated with other place names and provides intriguing evidence of historical linguistic change in BKSL.

TURTLE OVER-THERE TEMPLE TURTLE OVER THERE (Figure 4c), a.k.a., Ban Na Tao (‘village field turtle’) is another community in the Ban Khor sub-district. Because both toponyms include the word “turtle,” it is tempting to infer the place name sign was influenced by the written name. In fact, however, both the written/spoken and signed place names have been influenced by local topography, more specifically, by the many turtles at the large stream near the village. Additionally, Ban Na Tao is distinctive because for such a small village, it has an unusually large and beautiful temple. This distinctive temple is included in the BKSL toponym: the string of descriptive signs followed by THERE, with the final point in the actual direction of the community.

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5. In his anthropological study of the Social System of Don Daeng Village—A Community Study in Northeast Thailand, Koichi Mizuno observed that, “The inhabitants possess a feeling of living together, and identity themselves through its name or such stereotyped image [sic] as ‘our village is peaceful and cooperative, having seldom nag len or gangsters, but many in other villages.’ (Mizuno 1971, p.27).

6. The meaning of Khwang Klii is not transparent to many contemporary Thai speakers. However, based on conversations with two Thai academics it seems that Khwang Klii is a game or sport mentioned in old Thai folk tales like “Sang Thong (The Golden Conch Shell).” In this story, Tee Klii is a game played by the Hindu God Indhra, who transforms into a human being and comes to the Earth to play the game with a king. This game between the gods and men was baseball- like with a pitcher, a batter and a ball. ‘Khwang’ means to pitch or throw. (‘Tee’ means to hit.) Klii refers to some sort of ball. Thus, for current purposes, I use the rather vague English translation, a “ball game.”
Figure 4: Three Examples of BKSL Toponyms for Known/Directly Experienced Places Beyond Ban Khor Village

Figure 4a: Version 1 BAN KHWANG KLII — an older and longer version of the sign

SHOUT  HIT-on the-HEAD  OVER-THERE

Figure 4b: Version 2 BAN KHWANG KLII — a newer and shorter version of the sign

HIT-on the-HEAD  OVER-THERE

Figure 4c: BAN NA TAO — Another Village in Ban Khor Sub-district

TURTLE  OVER-THERE  TEMPLE

TURTLE  OVER-THERE
Place name signs for sites beyond the Ban Khor sub-district are formulated in the same basic fashion. Phon Sawan, the district capital, and Khrungthep, the national capital (a.k.a. Bangkok, as it is referred to in English) are two locations beyond Ban Khor. Driving by car from Ban Khor, it takes 30 minutes and 12+ hours to reach the two cities respectively. All community members will travel to the district capital several times in their lives in order to officially register births, marriages, deaths, etc.; and many villagers or their close kinsmen and friends will travel to the national capital to work for short or long periods. Thus, although Phon Sawan and Khrungthep are outside of Ban Khor, they are part of the community’s shared experiential knowledge—communal knowledge that is reflected in the etymologies of their respective place name signs.

Phon Sawan (‘little hill heaven’) is signed MID-CHEST PHOTOGRAPH MID-CHEST THERE in Ban Khor Sign Language (Figure 4d). This name sign derives from the fact all Thai citizens must register at their district capital for a national identification card, one that includes a black and white headshot, that is, a picture of the person shot from the mid-chest upward.

Regarding the national capital, Khrungthep (‘city of angels’), the underlying canonical form of this BKSL place name is: DRIVE/GO WORK (earn)-MONEY WAY OVER THERE. Until mid-way through the first decade of the 21st century, however, there was no superordinate word for ‘work’ in Ban Khor Sign Language. Thus, there are at least two versions, and slight variants for each version, of this signed toponym; and use of a particular version strongly correlates with the sex of the speaker.

Among female signers Khrungthep may be expressed as follows:

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7. When research on Ban Khor Sign Language began in 1996 and through the early 2000s until around 2008, BKSL signers expressed the concept of ‘work’ by signing one or more specific types of work, such as: SEWING, HERDING, LOGGING, CHARCOAL-MAKING, and so forth. With the exception the community’s primary economic activity—rice agriculture—other forms of work are closely associated with sex and gender roles.

8. When talking about another person, his/her sex or travel and work experiences, may also influence language choice and use of either the WASH CLOTHES or LAY BRICKS versions of the BKSL signs for Khrungthep.
1. DRIVE WASH (clothes) WAY-OVER-THERE (Figure 5a)
2. WASH CLOTHES OVER-THERE (Figure 5b)
3. WASH LONG SLEEVE (clothes) WASH MONEY MONEY OVER-THERE (Figure 5c).

Receptively, male signers understand the preceding version and its variants, but they often produce another version of the BKSL toponym for Khrungthep. Men express the same basic descriptive strings but substitute LAYING-BRICKS for WASHING-CLOTHES. Etymologically, both gendered versions (and their variants) derive from the fact that over the years, numerous Ban Khorians have gone to the national capital to work and earn money: women working as live-in maids (WASHING CLOTHES) and men working construction (LAYING BRICKS).

Further analysis of the three examples in Figure 5 elucidates other interesting features of the BKSL toponymic onomastic system. Although Ban Khorians have some (in)direct experience with and knowledge of Khrungthep, the national capital is still remotely positioned geographically. This is evident from use of the sign DRIVE (see Figure 5a), which is often part of (quasi-)descriptive sequences of signs for far away places, because the distance is so great that travel by bus, van, truck, or car (versus motorcycle, moped, bicycle, or walking) is necessitated.

Comparative examination of the final indexical points in the examples in Figure 5 reveals another interesting aspect of the BKSL place names: the systematic deictic anchoring of all geographically remote locations in one of two possible experientially-near, quasi-local locations on the signing community’s shared cognitive map. To reiterate, BKSL toponyms always end with a final deictic specifier consisting of an absolute point toward the actual location of the place vis-à-vis the speaker and Ban Khor. Yet the orientation of the final points shown in Figure 5 are not uniform.

Although all three of the language consultants were filmed in the same location and faced the same direction, two women point over their left shoulders (Figures 5a and 5b) whereas one points over her right shoulder (Figure 5c). This difference is not a performance error. To the contrary, it is entirely consistent with the organizing logic of the BKSL toponymic onomastic system. All three consultants’ final points are absolute points toward one of the two provincial capitals where a Ban Khorian would go to catch a bus to begin the long journey to Khrungthep (Bangkok). In fact, those two provincial capital cities serve as the default deictic anchorings for the final points of all toponyms for far away places in Ban Khor Sign Language.

*Figure 5: BKSL Toponym for Khrungthep (a.k.a. Bangkok) - the National Capital of Thailand*

*Figure 5a: KHRUNGTHEP*
Including Phon Sawan and Khrungthep (Bangkok), there are at least 10 fully conventionalized toponyms for non-Ban Khor locations. Most (7) refer to neighboring communities (e.g., sub-districts, districts and provinces) that Ban Khorians have first-hand knowledge of and to which they (have) actually travel(ed). A few (3) standard toponyms for places beyond Ban Khor refer to more distant locations (e.g., cities, provinces, or countries) that BKSL signers know of second-hand either from television or from stories told by/about fellow villagers who have visited those far-away places. In all cases, the basic linguistic form is the same as that of the previous examples: a string of descriptive signs ending with a point toward the actual location or toward one of the two cities where one would begin travel to distant sites beyond Ban Khor.

9. This is a conservative estimate based on the results of formal elicitation research described above in endnote 4. It is quite possible that in BKSL there are more place names for villages in other sub-districts contiguous to Ban Khor and for other communities scattered along the roads to Phon Sawan, surrounding district capitals, and to either of the two nearby provincial capitals. It is also possible that there are additional toponyms in BKSL for more distant locations, although that seems less likely.
When the need arises to discuss a place where Ban Khorians have no previous experiential knowledge and thus have no conventionalized name sign, the signer has two options. One is simply to refer to the place as GO (WAY) OVER-THERE (Figure 3d), in which case there is no final point or no specific deictic anchoring for the final point (e.g., a non-absolute point). Alternatively, the signer will produce an often long, quasi-descriptive sequence—one that invokes a common stereotype(s) of the place.

For instance, while many foreign tourists are familiar with the northern Thai city and province of Chiangmai (‘new city’), it is an area that is largely unfamiliar to Ban Khorians and for which there is no fully conventionalized toponym in BKSL; however, two candidate answers include:

1. FEMALE BEAUTIFUL WAY-OVER-THERE SAO THEM MARRY AREA (Figure 6a)
   ..................SAO..................

2. DRIVE SAO WAY-OVER-THERE LONGAN (fruit) BIG WAY-OVER-THERE (Figure 6b)

Both examples include the sign SAO, a term for a young woman, often an attractive young woman, in her teens or twenties. In Thailand, Chiangmai has a reputation for being home to many lovely women. For example, a Google search using the key words ‘Chiangmai’ and ‘beautiful women’ yields the web address www.chiangmai.net, which describes Chiangmai as follows: “The city is famous for her friendly people, beautiful women, refined handicrafts, cool climate and stunning mountain scenery.”
Figure 6: Examples of Non-conventionalized BKSL Toponyms for Distant Non-Ban Khor Locations

Figure 6a: Version 1 of a Non-conventionalized Toponym for CHIANGMAI

*SAO in BKSL (as well as in spoken Thai and Nyoh) is a gender and age-specific word for a young woman.
Figure 6b: Version 2 of a Non-conventionalized Toponym for CHIANGMAI

- DRIVE
- SAO*
- WAY-OVER-THERE
- LONGAN (fruit)

- BIG
- WAY-OVER-THERE

*SAO in BKSL (as well as in spoken Thai and Nyoh) is a gender and age-specific word for a young woman.

Figure 6c: A Non-conventionalized Toponym for VIETNAM

- TROUSERS
- MACHINE GUNFIRE

- TROUSERS
- MACHINE GUNFIRE
- WAY-OVER-THERE
Chiangmai is also famous for its longan fruit, and another Google search for “famous fruit of Chiangmai” produces the web address www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/fruit-drinks.html. At that site, the following description appears: “By the time August arrives, the famous longan (a.k.a. lumyai) fruit appears, especially in Lumpoon (just south of Chiangmai), where a major yearly festival is held in honor of that fruit.”

This stereotype is also invoked in the second gloss, LONGAN BIG (Figure 6b).

Although they are not yet fully conventionalized, the two preceding sign sequences for ‘Chiangmai’ are not only quasi-descriptive but also include the final indexical points characteristic of BKSL toponyms. The final deictic specifiers depicted in figures 6a and 6b are made in different directions, but (like the earlier Bangkok examples in Figure 5) they are true directional points in that they index the nearest two hub cities where it would be possible to commence a long-distance journey.

Geographically and experientially, Chiangmai is quite far from Ban Khor. In both Figures 6a and 6b this is apparent both from the size of the final deictic points, which are so large they exceed the camera’s lens, as well as by the accompanying phoo mouthings, which increase in volume, pitch and/or more aspiration to indicate greater distance. Emphasizing the fact vehicular travel is required to reach the location, the sign DRIVE (Figure 6b) again reinforces how far Chiangmai is from Ban Khor.

In Ban Khor Sign Language there are no fully conventionalized place names for foreign countries, except one. The Lao People’s Democratic Republic is so geographically close that the place name sign is PADDLE (boat) WAY-OVER-THERE, and the last sign is an absolute point toward the closest city where it is possible to cross the Mekong River to Laos. If signers want or need to discuss international locations, however, they again do so either by 1) using the generic GO WAY-OVER-THERE (Figure 3d), or 2) using a quasi-descriptive string of lexemes derived from stereotypes of the non-Ban Khor location followed by WAY-OVER-THERE, a final point toward either of the two provincial capital cities where it would be possible to catch major public transportation that, after several transfers, would eventually enable travel to international destinations.

The example in Figure 6c is typical of this second pattern. It depicts a non-conventionalized place name sign that not only conforms to the basic linguistic organization of toponyms in BKSL but also reflects the logic of the language’s underlying cognitive map vis-à-vis non-Ban Khor locations and imagined elsewhere(s). One candidate sign for Vietnam is TROUSERS MACHINE GUN-FIRE TROUSERS MACHINE GUN-FIRE WAY-OVER-THERE. Drawing on distinctive and widely known historico-cultural stereotypes, it invokes an image of a very different, non-Ban Khor sort of place: one where people wore/wear áo ba ba trousers (a two-piece shirt and trouser set of traditional Vietnamese clothing) versus classic Thai sarongs and where it was/is a war zone with rapidly firing machine guns.

More of the aforementioned long, descriptive sequences for far-away locations are appearing in BKSL, and a few (6) appear to be conventionalizing. Most of these emerging toponyms are for foreign countries that Ban Khorians are indirectly encountering via proliferating communications media or expanding travel experiences of fellow community members. Continuing creation of new BKSL toponyms of this sort, however, is becoming the linguistic exception rather than the rule.
Conclusion

Over the last decade, especially within the last half-decade, the community of Ban Khor has experienced dramatic economic and social change which is rapidly altering the traditional language ecology that gave rise to and sustained Ban Khor Sign Language. Heightened language contact with Thai Sign Language and the national Deaf community, in particular, are altering local language ideologies and patterns of language use. Language shift away from BKSL to TSL is now endangering the continued viability of the indigenous sign language.

These trends are evident in BKSL’s changing toponymic onomastic system. Younger BKSL signers (age 30 or below), for instance, are using a new sign for their own community. Depicted in Figure 7a, it is a calque of the spoken/written Thai toponym: BAN (home/village) and KHOR (a wooden clacker put around the neck of a water buffalo).

Far more common, however, is the trend of borrowing place name signs from Thai Sign Language, borrowing not only in the absence of but also despite the existence of indigenous BKSL toponyms — i.e., BANGKOK (see Figure 7b and compare with Figure 5). Abandonment of BKSL toponyms and replacement with TSL is not limited to this particular sub-lexicon. In recent years the rate and scope of vocabulary borrowing has increased dramatically across all lexical domains, including in core vocabulary.

These toponymic changes are indicative of more profound language shift away from BKSL toward TSL. Like too many indigenous languages around the world, Ban Khor Sign Language is now endangered. This is unfortunate because study of the language and its toponymic onomastic system provides rare insights into the contemporary etymological origins as well as natural processes of conventionalization and historical linguistic change of place names in a new language. Finally, in highlighting the richness of extant linguistic and cultural diversity, this case study also underscores what is at stake, that is, the potential humanitarian and scientific loss that results from escalating, world-wide language endangerment.

Figure 7: Calquing and Borrowing—Evidence of Language Contact, Change and Endangerment

Figure 7a: New Calqued Sign for BAN KHOR in BKSL

*khor = traditional wooden clacker hung around the neck of a water buffalo.
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