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# Macro and micro-social variation in Asia-Pacific sign languages

Introduction to Special Issue, *Asia-Pacific Language Variation* 6(1)

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The volume of research on sign language (SL) variation has grown considerably in recent years but, as in other areas of SL research, there have been comparatively fewer reports from the Asia-Pacific region (Moriarty Harrelson et al., 2016). The region is already known for the extreme diversity of its (spoken) language ecologies (Cunningham, Ingram, & Sumbuk, 2006; Goebel, 2016; Volker, 2015), and it should come as no surprise that this diversity extends to the signed languages of the region.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue draw attention to that diversity: perhaps contrary to popular belief, SL practices across the Asia-Pacific region can, and do differ in remarkable ways that strengthen our understanding of language variation. To that end, I begin by highlighting the distinctive sociolinguistic settings and practices covered by this special issue. This is followed by a discussion of macro- and micro-social variation, why this theme is so relevant for SL variation studies, and how it is taken up by the papers that follow.

## 1. Sociolinguistic diversity in the sign languages of the Asia-Pacific region

SL research has been dominated overwhelmingly by what Mudd et al. (this issue) describe as 'deaf community sign languages' – also referred to as 'national' (Branson & Miller, 1997), 'urban' (Dolman, 1986) and 'macro-community' sign languages (Schembri, Fenlon, Cormier, & Johnston, 2018). More recently, a valuable contribution to the field has been made by studies of a different kind of SL (de Vos & Zeshan, 2012; de Vos & Pfau, 2015), described variously as 'indigenous' (Woodward, 2003), 'rural' (de Vos, 2011), 'emerging' (Meir, Sandler, Padden, & Aronoff, 2010), 'shared' (Nyst, 2012) and 'micro-community' sign languages (Schembri et al., 2018).

The emergence of these terms created instant dichotomies (urban-rural, macro-micro, and so on) that were swiftly followed by calls for further differentiation (de Vos & Zeshan, 2012, p.6; Nyst, 2012, p.268), but attempts to introduce such differentiation are criticised for implying a 'development cline' running from types of home sign to village/rural/shared sign languages to national/urban sign languages (Hou & Kusters, 2019). 'Home sign' is used to describe communication that emerges in the contexts of deaf people who do not have access to a SL (Kegl, Senghas, & Coppola, 1999); in rural areas, these practices include gesturing or signing, which is considered to be a natural means for communication with deaf people, and may entail an extensive set of conventional gestures (Nyst, Sylla, & Magassouba, 2012, p.268).

One of the most vocal critics of dichotomous approaches and the development cline is Nyst (2012), who writes of a 'grey area' between home sign languages and the sign languages of larger deaf communities. She calls for the documentation of communicative practices in that grey area in a way that is free from preconceived ideas such as 'full-fledged sign languages'. Only then, Nyst argues, 'can we begin to understand which factors are relevant in the shaping of sign language structure' (2012, p.568).

The first article of this special issue, by Lauren W. Reed, responds to this call sensitively and effectively. For Reed, it is not helpful to name or delineate the sign varieties that she encounters in Port Moresby, and in documenting these varieties she introduces emic terms used by community members: SIGN LANGUAGE and CULTURE. These two 'ways of signing' co-exist in Port Moresby, and the particular mix that a signer uses in a given interaction seems to depend in particular on the experience of one's interlocutor.

What is particularly unusual in Reed's account of the switches between SIGN LANGUAGE and CULTURE is the fact that community members have a sign to represent the metalinguistic practice of switching from one 'way of signing' to another, which Reed glosses switch-caps. The steady stream of arrivals from rural areas, where CULTURE develops, makes it likely that this co-existence will continue for the near future – though Reed notes that a dictionary of sign language is currently in production, and wonders what effect this will have on community practices.

Katie Mudd, Hannah Lutzenberger, Connie de Vos, Paula Fikkert, Onno Crasborn and Bart de Boer focus their attention on Kata Kolok, a variety that emerged in a very different sociolinguistic context to the 'ways of signing' of Port Moresby. Kata Kolok literally means 'deaf talk' and emerged five generations ago in a village in the north of Bali, Indonesia, where there is a high incidence of hereditary deafness (de Vos, 2012). As a result, Kata Kolok is shared between deaf and hearing community members, facilitating integration between deaf and hearing villagers. Mudd et al. set out to test assertions made by Meir, Israel, Sandler, Padden and Aronoff (2012) – that shared sign languages exhibit more variation in the expression of everyday concepts.

Both Reed's CULTURE and Kata Kolok feature practices shared between deaf and hearing people, which undoubtedly has consequences for how these practices are structured: one of the challenges facing SL sociolinguists is to determine the nature of these consequences. Does the participation of hearing people act as a conservative force that stymies language change, or promote linguistic innovation, or both? One of Mudd et al.'s preliminary findings is that deaf and hearing signers may have different lexical preferences. In response to the same stimuli, deaf participants produce what appear to be more specific descriptions than hearing participants.

In light of the potential of communicative setting to influence structural processes such as lexicalisation (de Vos, 2011), this raises tantalising possibilities: could it be, for example, that the need to interact with hearing interlocutors less fluent in Kata Kolok promotes some ways of signing (which Mudd et al. term 'productive synonyms') over others ('perceptual synonyms')? And what roles are played by other factors, such as the smaller number of regular interlocutors?

Unlike Kata Kolok, which is used fluently by a few hundred deaf and hearing people, BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language) is used by tens if not hundreds of thousands of deaf people across Indonesia's urban centres (Palfreyman, 2019). The editor, Nick Palfreyman, examines spontaneous, conversational data from signers in the cities of Solo and Makassar, and finds four variables that are used to create social meaning. These variables index identities along regional and ethnic lines, as well as hearing status.

Ever since Labov (1966) wrote about the linguistic variable as a structural unit, the variable has been at the heart of language variation and change, and Palfreyman asks where one might look in a SL in order to find socially meaningful variables. For BISINDO, two of these variables are found in constructed action (CA), where signers ‘quote’ a non-linguistic action of a referent as they sign (Hodge, Ferrara, & Anible, 2019), in a manner similar to enacted dialogue for spoken languages. Effective use of CA often requires a signer to pick up on nuances in the way that people sign, and this means that stretches of CA are a particularly good place to look for sociolinguistic variables.

One of the other variables in Palfreyman’s article occurs in the mouthing practices of Javanese BISINDO users. Mouthings are lip movements that imitate the patterns visible on the lips of hearing speakers (Boyes Braem & Sutton-Spence, 2001), though it should be noted that not all signers use mouthings, and that not all signs are accompanied by mouthings. In the multilingual settings of the Asia-Pacific region, we might ask which languages are used by ambient speakers, and how (if at all) the use of sign language mouthings is influenced by sociolinguistic practices in ambient speech communities.

Palfreyman (2016, this issue) shows that some BISINDO signers are using mouthing variation to index Javanese identity, and McKee (2019) reports that a similar mouthing practice is used in New Zealand Sign Language by Māori signers. Meanwhile, research on BSL suggests that the mouthing of dialect words might also contribute to the creation of ‘regional accents’ in sign languages (Schembri & Fenlon, 2019). On the basis of these recent studies, mouthings seem highly suited to the expression of social meaning in sign languages.

Having opened, at the micro-level, with idiolectal variation in Papua New Guinea, the issue closes at the macro-level, with cross-linguistic variation in East Asia. Sagara and Palfreyman present a study of Japanese Sign Language (JSL) and Taiwan Sign Language (TSL), which were in contact during the Japanese colonial period, from 1915, when the first deaf school was founded in Taiwan, until 1945. The quantitative study of variation across data sets – comparative sociolinguistics (Poplack & Tagliamonte, 2001) – is still a rare endeavour for sign languages, although several studies of British Sign Language, Australian Sign Language and New Zealand Sign Language have enabled comparative studies of those languages, such as Schembri et al. (2010).

Keiko Sagara and Nick Palfreyman begin by looking at the variable expression of the numerals 10, 100 and 1000 in JSL, which are found to pattern according to region – Kanto signers prefer variants featuring numeral incorporation (‘NI variants’), while Kansai signers favour variants that show the number of zeros in their form (‘Z variants’). A parallel investigation finds that the same variable patterns regionally in TSL: Taipei signers prefer NI variants and Tainan signers prefer Z variants, although there are striking differences, too. In JSL, for example, the trend described above is bucked by variants for ‘1000’ (Kanto signers prefer Z variants for ‘1000’), while in TSL, Taipei signers prefer Z variants for ‘100’. Sagara and Palfreyman contend that this is likely to be linked to frequency of use: it is surely no coincidence that the smallest bank notes in their respective currencies are ¥1,000 and NT\$100. Although the qualitative analysis is framed at the macro-social level, they also consider the way that these variables operate at the micro-level, which is discussed further in the next section.

## 2. Sign language variation at the macro and micro-level

As well as reflecting the sociolinguistic diversity of the region, the articles in this issue are united in considering SL variation at different sociological levels, building on the ‘waves’ of analytic practice identified by Eckert (2008). According to her schema, ‘first wave’ studies adopt essentialist approaches that deploy macro-sociological groupings (class, gender, age, and so on), while ‘second wave’ studies use ethnographic methods to investigate local groupings, but variation continues to be regarded as marking social categories (Eckert, 2012). Social constructionist approaches that focus on situated social interaction constitute the ‘third wave’ of analytic practice.

Compared with theoretical and methodological advances by spoken language researchers, the study of SL variation ‘is still in the relatively early stages’ (Lucas & Bayley, 2016, p.340); while Labov’s work began in the 1960s, the first large scale SL study to be inspired by the classical Variationist tradition was Lucas, Bayley and Valli (2001). There is now a burgeoning body of ‘first wave’ work, applying macro-social categories such as region, age, gender and register (including de Beuzeville, Johnston, & Schembri, 2009; Fenlon, Cormier, & Schembri, 2014; Fenlon, Schembri, Rentelis, & Cormier, 2013; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001; McKee, Schembri, McKee, & Johnston, 2011; Palfreyman, 2019; Schembri & Johnston, 2007; and Stamp et al., 2014).

For the most part, however, the analytic practices of the second and third waves are still to be applied to sign languages; major studies of SL sociolinguistics ‘have not yet examined any particular region’s deaf community to the same depth that is common in ethnographic studies of spoken language variation and change’ (Schembri & Johnston, 2013, p.519). Given the strong focus on the macro-social level to date, this issue brings the micro-level variation to the table as well, in the belief that a gentle shift in focus will act as a mild corrective to the field. This also offers the chance to consider how patterns in SL variation at macro and microsocial levels relate to each other.

For example, a grammatical variable in BISINDO (Palfreyman, this issue) can be observed at both macro and micro level. Ambar, a deaf woman from Solo, uses grammatical variation in a stretch of Constructed Action to colour the performances of the two roles that she enacts. In one of these roles, Ambar constructs dialogue from her older, hearing sister (who does not sign) and uses a variant that originates from co-speech gesture. In the other role, Ambar represents herself, and uses a suppletive variant that has grammaticalised within BISINDO (Palfreyman, 2019): this suppletive variant is arguably more ‘deaf’ than the co-speech gesture, which is associated with hearing people. Mixed effects modelling suggests that the realisation of this variable in 162 constructed action contexts is influenced by whether it is uttered by a hearing person or a deaf person (Palfreyman, 2019, p.240). If this practice can be observed at the micro-level, is it driven from the macro-level, or is it constructed *in situ* at the micro-level each time? This question can only be answered once studies on other, similar variables become available.

In seeking to apply quantitative methods to a micro-community SL, Mudd et al. (this issue) face an interesting methodological quandary: the macro-social categories typically used for such studies, such as region and age, do not seem to be relevant for the Kata Kolok community: geographically, Kata Kolok is used on a much smaller scale than languages such as American SL and Australian SL, while all signers ‘live relatively close together and frequently interact,

regardless of their age'. Therefore Mudd et al. must find ways to reflect language use at the microsocial level in their quantitative study: region is scaled down to the level of clan membership, and there are other differences too, such as the inclusion of hearing Kata Kolok users.

Sagara and Palfreyman apply quantitative methods using macro-social categories, but also consider the possibility that the variable under study might be linked with creating social identity. For example, Heinrich (2018, p.176) describes hearing individuals in Japan who engage in what he terms 'dialect cosplay' – dialect is no longer necessarily away to index one's regional background; one can use a *nise hogen*, or 'fake younger dialect', to index a regional identity that is not one's own. A few signers in the Japanese city of Kagoshima have adopted the Z variant from the Kansai region alongside their own local variant – given the association of Z variants with the Kansai, could this be an example of deaf *nise hogen*?

Macro/micro distinctions have often been used in linguistics (Fishman, 1972; Schegloff, 1987), and Layder (1994) regards 'macro-micro' as one of the key tensions on which social theorising has centred. Of course, inflexible compartmentalisation along macro and micro lines does not reflect the complex relationships between social and linguistic structures (Coulmas, 1997, p.3), and Heller (2001, p.212) is right to point out that empirical work fails to identify the different types of data that the macro-micro distinction implies.

Equally, however, a focus on macro/micro distinctions can move us towards a more satisfying explanation for what we see in the data. Sharma (2017) argues that the excessive focus on groups in variationist theorising has left some processes less easy to explain. If we allow for an intra-individual dimension to contrasts in indexicality (at the micro-level), a number of regular and common patterns become more explicable. The need to focus on intra-group variation is even more evident in highly multi-ethnic speech communities such as Kohima (Nagaland). Satyanath (2018, p.110) suggests that group and individuals provide two complementary perspectives, even though at times these perspectives appear to be in conflict; while ongoing changes can be uncovered by looking at groups, the mechanisms of change cannot be fully understood without looking at individual behaviour.

Just as third wave approaches increase the set of analytic practices available to spoken language sociolinguists (Sharma, 2011, p.2), so is a similar expansion for SL research a necessary innovation, if we are to understand SL variation better. There have been encouraging moves in this direction. In their study of Black ASL, McCaskill, Hill, Bayley and Lucas (2011) find three phonological variables that are conditioned by ethnicity, and importantly, this work builds on community-based observations and anecdotes. As early as the 1980s, references are made to 'a Black way of signing used by Black deaf people in their own cultural milieu' (Hairston & Smith, 1983, p.55), implying that variables tracked at the macro-level may be used as a resource to fashion ethnic identity. Another promising sign is Blau (2017), whose study on Deaf gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area finds that, the frequent use of distal joints in the articulation of signs is a socially-conditioned variable, and can index gay identity. His suggestion that distalisation is 'a component of a particular linguistic style' (Blau, 2017, p.36) is a significant moment for the study of SL variation.

Crucially, in order to do work on variables, methodological innovation is necessary. Lucas and Bayley (2016) imply that ethnographic studies of smaller groups of signers are a natural follow-

up to the large-scale variationist studies that have been undertaken to date. Gumperz (1982) concludes that socially situated data are necessary if we are to understand language patterns more clearly, and Palfreyman (this issue) notes that this may require sociolinguists to review the place of spontaneous data collected in well-equipped laboratories with the aim of compiling language corpora. In other words, we must think again about our data collection practices – to paraphrase Heller (2001, p.213), what interactions do we now need to focus on, and why, and how?

At this point, it is useful to acknowledge developments that have been taking place in the field of deaf anthropology. Sociolinguistics has long incorporated diverse methods and drawn from neighbouring fields (Coupland, 2016), and much of the recent work of linguistic anthropologists already pioneers the use of linguistic ethnography (Hou & Kusters, 2019). Indeed, by focusing on natural communicative practices in diverse sociolinguistic contexts, ‘linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology expanded understandings of the actual diversity of deaf communicative practices in everyday sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts’ (Friedner & Kusters, 2020, p.38), and forthcoming studies on how language ideologies shape and are shaped by language practices (Kusters, Green, Moriarty Harrelson, & Snoddon, 2020) seem sure to provide further assistance to sign language sociolinguists.

In particular, engagement with translanguaging theory (García & Wei, 2014) has encouraged fresh investigation of communicative practices and a willingness to consider multimodal language use and linguistic repertoires (De Meulder, Kusters, Moriarty, & Murray, 2019). Although the language of variables and variation is not used, the scrutiny of repertoire is a sound approach to finding and understanding variation because it places high value on the agency and resourcefulness of the signer. Reed (this issue, p.45) observes how translanguaging licenses ‘a bottom-up approach, looking first at users’ idiolects, and then identifying the patterns that link those idiolects’. She notes that focusing on the individual will help to determine why certain signs go on to become more widespread due to signers who have influence in social networks. Her analytical practice leads to a more robust understanding of the linguistic variation in her situated data, as the signers of Port Moresby switch easily between one ‘way of signing’ and another.

### **3. Closing comments**

The papers in this issue have their origins in the Symposium on Sociolinguistic Variation in Signed and Spoken Languages of the Asia-Pacific Region, held at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in July 2019. This Symposium built on work that began with the sign language sessions at the third NWAV Asia-Pacific conference in Wellington, May 2014, and aimed to promote dialogue between academics working on variation in signed and spoken languages. One of the central conclusions that emerged from discussion during the Symposium was the importance of sharing research findings cross-modally and explaining the ways in which we work. With that in mind, the papers in this special issue seek to share recent research on SL variation in the Asia-Pacific region with a wider audience. Each paper also provides a link to a sign language version of the English abstract in addition to offering a non-English version in one of the local spoken languages.

Since its inception, the Asia-Pacific Language Variation journal has been committed to representing signed languages alongside spoken ones (Siu, 2016; Sze et al., 2015; Wei, Sze, & Wong, 2018), making it a fitting host for these papers. I would like to thank those who have contributed to this special issue in different ways. The articles that follow have benefited from a splendid team of peer reviewers, to whom all of the authors extend deep gratitude. I would like to acknowledge the backing I have received from UCLan, a fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust (ECF-2016-795), and financial support from some attendees, making it possible to host the Symposium. My thanks to Miriam Meyerhoff and James Stanford for supporting the idea of a special issue, and Kelhouvinuo Suokhrie for assistance with copyediting. This special issue would not have transpired without the kindness, determination and encouragement of the general editor, Shobha Satyanath, to whom I am very grateful. The issue is dedicated to my mother, Margaret, and my partner's father, Gian Paolo, who died during its preparation and are much missed.

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