

THE SIGNULARITY IS NEAR: THE FUTURE OF SIGNED LANGUAGE IN SCOTLAND

It is now established that ‘the languages of Scotland and Ulster past and present’ include British Sign Language, in a lineage that can be traced from signing, deaf Princess Joanna (1428-1493) through the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 and into the foreseeable future. Looking into this future inevitably entails situating Scotland in a global context.

I have long argued for recognition of “heritage sign languages” (Turner 1999): encouragingly, there has been increased attention to the nature of these languages and their contribution to society. Inter-generational transmission of national sign languages nevertheless remains under strain in many countries. Combined with ongoing promotion of biomedical interventions, this gives reason for caution about the future of signing communities.

The ground is now shifting further. Signed communication, once inherently face-to-face, now routinely takes place across time and space. Signers everywhere possess the pocket-sized means to express themselves to global audiences.

Meanwhile, technologies to analyse, reproduce and switch between languages advance. The digitisation of movement and embodied expression of emotion are evolving. Machine translation between signed, spoken and written modalities is maturing rapidly.

Reviewing this landscape, this paper concludes that securing the status of signed language may inevitably entail radical integration of the global Deaf diaspora (Friedner & Kusters 2015) as a conjoined whole, connected by increasingly unified forms of International Sign (Rosenstock & Napier 2016). In a global context, therefore, an historically-informed sociolinguistic reading of the future of BSL in Scotland points to incremental lexical and grammatical convergence with other natural signed languages.

This will entail re-evaluation of sign languages as bounded systems, plus profound adjustments in ideas about sign linguistic purism. I will argue that embracing technological shifts – and reorientating to their implications as enhancements – may ultimately underwrite the greatest prospect for the maintenance of Deaf ontologies and the ongoing vitality of heritage signing.

References

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- Turner, Graham H. 1999. “‘Ungraceful, Repulsive, Difficult to Comprehend’: Sociolinguistic Consideration of Shifts in Signed Languages”. *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 10: 131–152.