Edinburgh Research Explorer

Collecting, coining and defining new terms in BSL

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The demand from education
Despite the fact that most profoundly deaf children in the UK are now implanted at a young age, the demand for technical terms in BSL is still strong. The SSC Glossary website currently receives 14,000 hits a month, a quarter from Scotland. Not all severely and profoundly deaf children are implanted, and not all implanted children use speech. There is no easy way for families to predict the outcome of a CI operation and period of oral habilitation. In some countries, e.g. Australia, the trend to mass implantation has led educators to abandon sign language (Johnston, 2004). In the UK, BSL users are determined to maintain standards for interpreters and for people who work with them (BDA, 2012). This community pressure has influenced some teachers of deaf children, Communication Support Workers (CSWs) and deaf charities to improve the quality of signing in schools and colleges. In Scotland the Deaf community’s demand for a BSL Act on the model of the Gaelic Language Act may lead to the maintenance of the language, in contrast to the rapid decline in Auslan which has occurred in Australia.

How are new terms created in BSL?
Languages use many ways of expanding the lexicon: borrowing, compounding, simplification and language play; in BSL iconicity, lexicalisation and metaphor are also important processes. Examples of all these can be found in the BSL glossary:
- **Borrowing** - from English. The Glossary team accepts the use of borrowed terms from English, often compounds, lexicalisation and metaphor are also important processes. For example, the sign for AMNIOTIC-SAC originally included the handshape (MASS) which links the concepts. Comments to the team from both deaf and hearing users of the Glossary site suggest that these families of signs are particularly helpful to pupils learning science.
- **Compounding** - ROCKET+PLANE= SPACE-SHUTTLE (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999)
- **Lexicalisation** - borrowed terms from English, often compounds, become one new sign in BSL. (Johnston & Schembri, 2007) e.g. HEART-ATTACK Biology glossary
- **Metaphor** - SPEED uses a visual metaphor where an object is large when near then rapidly diminishes into the distance.

Why do some languages have less vocabulary?
Languages like BSL have until the past 30 years mainly been used in domestic and work settings, particularly in industries which had a deaf workforce, such as Remploy. Since 1993 when Disabled Students Allowance was first available, Deaf BSL users have been able to study at university, and subsequently enter a much wider range of work and professional settings. Languages develop new vocabulary when there is a need for users to communicate new ideas. English has had many phases of vocabulary expansion. However, there are many other languages across the globe which initially had small vocabularies because of a period of colonisation or oppression. Lang et al. (2007) note that educators often led the process from the 1970s of standardising and publicising technical signs.

References