

Name Signs and Identity in

New Zealand Sign Language

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Personal names in any culture are a potential gold mine of information about social relationships, identity, history, and linguistic processes. In Deaf communities around the world, members are commonly referred to by sign names given to them by other Deaf people at various stages of life, which are different from the legal (spoken language) names given by parents at birth. The study of name signs provides a window on the relationship between sign language, social interaction, and identity, in this case within the New Zealand Deaf community. Because they are bestowed by other Deaf peers through a period of close acquaintance, name signs both signal and construct a person's identity as a recognized member of a Deaf community, which is often regarded by members as an extended "family" (Monaghan 1996, 463).

The acquisition of a name sign may mark a person's entry to a signing community, and its use reinforces the bond of shared group history and "alternative" language use (in relation to mainstream society). Thus, using name signs is a linguistically efficient means of personal reference and is culturally important for interactions in a signing community because social networks tend to hinge on connections with other Deaf people rather than one's family of origin (unless the family is also Deaf). Personal identity in the Deaf community is strongly shaped by (and reflected in) language use and by one's relationships with peers—information that is encapsulated in a small way in name signs. Because people in the NZ Deaf community often have several name signs (which are used either at different periods of their life or alternately within different social groups or audiences), their use is somewhat context dependent.

The form of name signs and the particular social values and practices associated with them vary considerably among different signed languages and Deaf cultures around the world. The analysis of name signs contributes to a linguistic understanding of lexical creation and sources in a signed

language. This chapter reports on a study that identifies types of name sign structures and derivations and describes their distribution in New Zealand Sign Language (a language used by a community of approximately 7,000 people). The chapter also discusses findings about the acquisition and use of name signs (such as differences between age groups and the use of alternate names) in terms of what these reveal about social norms and values in NZ Deaf culture.

WHAT ARE NAME SIGNS?

Name signs are a distinct category of signs in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), which are created as personal names for referring to others, usually members of a signing community.¹ Name signs seem to develop wherever a group of Deaf people have extended contact with each other and use sign language as their vernacular language. They are created for individuals within each generation or social grouping of Deaf people.² Most typically, name signs originate in deaf school settings where Deaf children form an autonomous social world beyond the gaze of teachers, which is governed by children's social norms and differentiated from the "authorities" by the use of sign language and a shared sense of Deaf identity. Like the nickname systems of non-Deaf school children

1. A *signing community* consists of Deaf people who use sign language as their preferred language of face-to-face communication. Most members have been deaf from infancy or early in their life and identify socially and culturally with other Deaf people. Non-Deaf (hearing) people, such as parents or children of Deaf people, interpreters, teachers, or social workers, may participate in signing communities and have name signs. This study, however, focuses on name signs of Deaf people themselves because their community is the primary reference group for the system of name signs.

2. The capitalization of *Deaf* has become a convention within both the Deaf studies literature and the Deaf community for referring to people who not only have a hearing loss but also identify themselves socially, linguistically, and culturally with other Deaf people who use sign language. This spelling is in contrast to *deaf*, which denotes hearing loss but not necessarily cultural or linguistic identity as part of a signing community. Most people who identify as Deaf have been audiotologically deaf since early childhood or birth and have had significant social contact throughout their life with others like themselves.

(Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre 1979, 2), the name signs invented by NZ Deaf children for each other appear to be little affected by either adult or hearing (non-Deaf) influences. Similarly, the name signs that Deaf adults bestow on each other later in life are determined by Deaf social norms and visual language structures rather than those of the “outside” hearing society.

BACKGROUND

A brief sketch of the historical backdrop to NZSL is useful in understanding the social circumstances and linguistic resources from which name signs arise. NZSL was named as a language only in the mid-1980s, although it has been evolving toward its present form since approximately 1880, when the first school for the deaf was opened in Christchurch. NZSL was previously referred to by Deaf people simply as “sign” or “deaf sign” and was not generally viewed as a language per se, prior to research on its structure by Collins-Ahlgren (1989). Negative perceptions of Deaf people’s signing were fuelled by the fact that signing was officially banned in the education of deaf children by educational policies enforced from 1880 until 1978. The first scientifically researched *Dictionary of New Zealand Sign Language*, published in 1997 (Kennedy et al.), signals a recent increase in public and academic awareness of Deaf people as a minority language community in New Zealand.

Belonging to the family of British and Australian sign languages (McKee and Kennedy 2000), NZSL is a young language that flourished underground in deaf educational settings (particularly residential) from 1880 onward and also in the adult Deaf community that grew from school networks. It is presumed that in the 1800s a small number of Deaf children with Deaf parents who signed a variety of British Sign Language (BSL), along with Deaf children who had been partly schooled in Britain or Australia using BSL and occasional Deaf adults employed as domestic help at the deaf schools acted as agents of language transmission in the early creolization of NZSL among school children. Because the vast majority of Deaf children enter school without exposure to sign language and generally cannot access adult language models within the school, NZSL is at least in part re-created by each successive generation of children.

Deaf children rapidly acquire schoolyard NZSL from slightly older peers, add to the lexicon and possibly grammar through group invention

and usage, and eventually come into contact with mature NZSL signers in the Deaf community as late teenagers or young adults. This pattern has repeated itself for about a century, with the notable exception of Deaf children born to Deaf parents (estimated at around 8 percent in New Zealand), who acquire NZSL natively if their parents sign. This small group of children plays a vital role in the transmission and standardization of NZSL. However, the creation of name signs by Deaf children in New Zealand is an example of spontaneous and systematic language invention arising with limited exposure to conventional models of a signed language.

The majority of Deaf adults in New Zealand who have grown up Deaf and been in contact with other Deaf people during their school years informally acquire and continue to use NZSL as their primary language of communication in the Deaf community. In contrast to middle-aged and younger signers, the older generation of Deaf people prefer to vocalize while signing (although not in standard English) and regard this spoken (voiced and speechread) element of signed communication as very important. NZSL, in whatever form, represents a vital means of social, emotional, practical, and intellectual survival—in other words, a full-fledged language that enables cultural existence. Outside their own language community, Deaf people negotiate communication using combinations of speech, speechreading, gesture, mime, writing, forms of contact signing with those who know some signs, and guesswork.³

For Deaf people, having a name sign signals membership in a community that uses NZSL because a name sign is first acquired at the point of contact with, and acceptance by, other signers. Anthropologists and social psychologists have described the cultural and social significance associated with names and naming practices in a range of cultures and social subgroups (cf. Levy-Bruhl 1926; Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre 1979). Given that naming systems are recognized as a subsystem of a language and culture, the existence of a name sign tradition among NZ Deaf people provides evidence that they constitute a subculture that is distinct in many important aspects from the surrounding hearing-speaking society.

3. *Contact signing* refers to the type of signed interlanguage that arises between Deaf and hearing (or nonfluent signer) interlocutors. It is often characterized by English word order, increased mouthing of English words, more fingerspelling, and a reduction of sign language grammatical structures. See Lucas and Valli (1992) for a discussion of contact language in relation to Deaf communities.

NAME SIGN SYSTEMS IN OTHER SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

Varying name sign systems have been described in Deaf populations elsewhere, including the United States (Meadow 1977; Supalla 1990, 1992; Mindess 1990), France (Mottez 1985), Sweden (Hedberg 1991), Desrosiers and Dubuisson (1992), Thailand (Nonaka 1997), China (Yau and He 1987), Argentina (Massone and Johnson 1991), and England (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999). As an example, Deaf Americans have a tradition of two distinct types of name signs: *arbitrary* and *descriptive*. Arbitrary name signs consist of one or more fingerspelled initials of a person's first and sometimes last name, combined with one of a conventional set of movements and locations on the upper body or face. For example, the American Sign Language (ASL) letter *P* may be tapped on the right side of the chin as a possible name sign for "Patrick," or a letter *B* shaken slightly side to side in neutral space could be a name sign for "Betty." Such name signs are called arbitrary because they have no intrinsic meaning connected to the person's identity other than the initial; they simply conform to linguistic conventions about the structure of a name sign.

In contrast, descriptive name signs derive from a physical or behavioral characteristic of a person (such as "curly hair" or "talkative"). In ASL, arbitrary name signs are more numerous than, and generally preferred to, descriptive name signs among the adult Deaf community (Supalla 1990; Mindess 1990). Supalla's (1992) *Book of Name Signs* (a naming guide for parents of Deaf children) advocates arbitrary name signs as the more orthodox system, based on the fact that Deaf parents in the United States traditionally give their Deaf children arbitrary name signs and eschew descriptive ones.

This cultural value differs from the conventions for name signs in Deaf communities such as New Zealand, Australia, England, China, and Thailand, for example, where descriptive name signs are the norm. However, in Australia,⁴ France (Mottez 1985), England (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999), and the United States (Meadow 1977), a different kind of arbitrary system was used in certain deaf schools up until the mid-1900s, in which pupils used and retained their locker numbers as name signs; this system

4. Personal communication with Robert Adam and Adam Schembri, Renwick College, Sydney, and Anne Bremner and Melissa Anderson, Barton Tafe, Melbourne, 1998.

appears to have disappeared with current generations. Anecdotal evidence is that the bearers of locker numbers may have preferred these seemingly impersonal name signs over the alternative of possibly unflattering descriptive name signs.

Supalla (1992) suggests that the arbitrary naming system based on fingerspelled initials probably stems from language planning decisions made by the founding educators of the deaf in the early nineteenth century, one of whom was Laurent Clerc, a Deaf Frenchman. In that period in France, signs incorporating the initial fingerspelled letter of a corresponding spoken word became popular in deaf education, and it is surmised that this influence transferred to the first U.S. school for the deaf, where the teachers probably encouraged the use of initialized name signs among the pupils. This apparently took hold as a tradition in the Deaf community in the United States, with arbitrary name signs becoming a highly conventionalized subsystem of ASL (Supalla 1992, 31–33).

By contrast, the language planning that took place in NZ deaf education proscribed the use of sign language and fingerspelling in classrooms from 1880 until 1978, instead using speech and speechreading exclusively. Although NZ sign language nevertheless flourished on the playgrounds and in the dorms (Collins-Ahlgren 1989), deaf school children were not exposed to a formal fingerspelling system for representing written letters on the hands until after the introduction of Australasian Signed English in 1979.⁵

The oralist tradition was widespread in deaf schools in Western Europe, Asia, and Great Britain's colonies from the late 1800s to the present and has undoubtedly influenced the form of name signs in many places. For example, in Thailand (Nonaka 1997) and China (Yau and He 1987), there is evidence that most name signs are descriptive of appearance, with minimal reference to spoken or spelled names.

Why Do Name Signs Arise?

Name signs develop as alternatives to spoken names (given and family) most obviously because Deaf people perceive and communicate in a vi-

5. In the absence of a formal fingerspelling code, it was (and still is) common among older Deaf people in New Zealand to supplement lip patterns with “air writing,” which means tracing letters in the air with the index finger, as if writing on a window. This was used as a means of making words—usually proper nouns—more easily visible than they would be through speechreading alone.

sual rather than an aural modality. People and their identities are experienced and coded visually, thus creating a linguistic need for a signed naming system. The giving, use, and knowledge of name signs also plays an important role in the social cohesion of a group. A Deaf community is no exception to the condition that:

Any verbal interaction within a group can only be meaningful when explicitly or implicitly, common terms of references are established; otherwise group relations break down. A group can exploit this phenomenon by establishing its own peculiar terms and labels. To function as part of this clique one has to break the “code”—comprehend and utilize the referents—often to acquire one oneself. (Morgan et al. 1979, 110)

Spoken names given by one’s family are not especially salient or accessible as identity labels in signed discourse. Spoken names and their social and linguistic significance are not easy for young Deaf children to learn by the usual informal means because they cannot hear their own or others’ names called, hear names used in direct address, or overhear others’ names used in conversation. Nor can Deaf children necessarily use spoken names easily because speech skills depend on hearing; thus Deaf children often have to be explicitly taught their own spoken/written names (cf. Rottenberg and Searfoss 1993) and the names of others around them.

For example, a Deaf informant recounted that as a child, she was visited at deaf school from time to time by an elderly couple, which she thought was very kind of them. Several years later, at the age of ten or eleven, she inquired about their identity and was surprised to learn that they were her grandparents. This information about personal identity had never been explicitly communicated to her. Another adult Deaf informant from a very large family reported that he does not know the full names of several of his older siblings, let alone cousins, nieces, and nephews. Our observation is that it is not uncommon for some Deaf people in New Zealand to know regular associates in the Deaf community by their name sign or initials only. This is not surprising because a large proportion of name signs in NZSL bear no relationship to the person’s legal name, although others are derived either directly or indirectly from the spoken name.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptions of name sign systems in other countries and our own experience of living in the contrasting sign language communities of the United States and New Zealand made us aware that name signs in New Zealand are both similar to and different from those found overseas. The distinctions in form were made abundantly clear to us personally as we moved between the two countries and were promptly renamed “appropriately,” according to the conventions of each language community. Our research questions in this study were the following:

1. What linguistic forms and derivations do name signs have in NZSL?
2. How are name signs distributed across these types? What is the dominant or most preferred type?
3. Are there differences in the type of name signs associated with different age groups?
4. When and how are name signs typically acquired and changed?
5. How many name signs do Deaf individuals have?

We videotaped the self-reported name signs of 118 Deaf people from age two years (reported by Deaf parents for their young Deaf children) to approximately seventy years old, in three major regions of New Zealand. Most informants had more than one name sign, so in total we recorded 223 name signs, excluding some that were acquired outside New Zealand. Informants were asked to give their legal name, age, the schools they attended, all the name signs they had had during their life, the date each one was acquired, and the etymology of each name sign. Data were collected by a Deaf researcher who is an immigrant member of the NZ Deaf community. Data were solicited from a cross-section of the community in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and school background (mainstream/deaf school).

From a preliminary analysis of the data, we made a typology of name signs (that was later expanded) that we used to record the various name signs of each informant. Successive name signs and their etymologies were noted in order to analyze patterns of change in name signs acquired at various junctures in people’s lives.

Schooling was noted as an indicator of when informants were likely to have first encountered a Deaf social group and been exposed to signing. The generations of Deaf people over forty years old have been educated

mainly in residential schools for the deaf, whereas younger generations are more likely to have experienced a deaf unit class or a fully mainstreamed situation for at least part of their schooling. Each of these settings creates different opportunities for access to sign language, a Deaf peer group, and the acquisition of name signs.

Our data collection approach differs from other studies of name signs in which random examples of name signs have been elicited from third parties. Because name signs are created and used by third parties rather than by the named people themselves, there are valid reasons for seeking name signs and etymologies from others. But because we were interested in linking name signs to personal data such as age, parentage (deaf or hearing), and patterns of acquisition of name signs, we chose to elicit personal profile data directly from informants. In this study we did not specifically elicit data on informants' feelings about their name signs, although frequently this information was volunteered, either explicitly or indirectly.

Our discussion of the data in this chapter, particularly about the usage conventions of name signs, is supplemented by our participant observation in the NZ Deaf community over ten years.

FORMATION OF NAME SIGNS IN NZSL

The formation of name signs highlights the linguistic resources and preferences of the community. The linguistic resources available to the NZ Deaf community for constructing name signs include a wide spectrum of possibilities because NZSL and its users exist in a contact situation with spoken English. Also, given the close historical relationship of NZSL to British and Australian sign languages, it could be expected that the name sign traditions in these language communities would also be quite similar, and this indeed was found to be true.⁶ We identified the following potential elements for the construction of NZSL name signs: gesture and mimetic description, the existing lexicon of NZSL, the phonological and morphological building blocks of NZSL (particularly classifiers used for describing size, shape, and movement), spoken English in the form of lip patterns, written English incorporated into NZSL in the form of a

6. For a comparative discussion of name signs in NZSL and Auslan, see McKee, McKee, Adam, and Schembri (2000).

manual alphabet (two-handed fingerspelling or, more recently, the one-handed alphabet from American Sign Language), and also combinations of these elements.

Name signs in NZSL are not straightforward to describe and categorize, as the NZSL community exhibits a range of ways of creating name signs drawing on these possible resources. Because deaf education in NZ has been dominated by a major emphasis on the teaching of speech articulation and speechreading, the incorporation (or mutation) of information on the lips has carried over into the formation of many name signs. However, the acceptability of signing has increased significantly since the 1980s, and the NZSL community is now experiencing a period of lexical growth and borrowing from American, Australian, and British Sign Languages, which could be expected to affect trends in the formation of name signs.