

**Skilled hands — Local and global perspectives on sign languages in unusual settings**

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In keeping with the “Looking Outward” theme of the conference, this presentation in the area of sign language linguistics discusses first-hand data from two very different understudied settings:

- A localized setting, with sign languages in “deaf villages”, where small-scale rural communities have a high incidence of hereditary deafness over several generations.
- A global setting, where deaf sign language users from different countries engage in improvised communication, bridging considerable linguistic and cultural gaps.

In “deaf villages”, both deaf and hearing people co-create and co-use a local sign language, and the socio-cultural situation of deaf people in these integrated communities is strikingly different from urban communities, where deaf people are a separate linguistic and cultural minority. Details of the linguistic properties of village sign languages have only emerged over the past few years, and it is evident that these sign languages exhibit many unique structures. I provide examples from endangered village sign languages in India, Mexico and Turkey to illustrate their typologically unusual features, in particular in the domains of spatial grammar and cardinal numerals.

The second setting involves deaf people from different countries around the world who do not have any shared language, yet manage to establish common ground in improvised communication when meeting for the first time. It has been known anecdotally that deaf people bridge such language gaps with relative ease, but systematic data on the characteristics of this kind of communication was previously not available. I discuss data on the development of ad hoc signed communication over a six-week period from four signers with widely diverging linguistic backgrounds (respectively Jordanian Sign Language and Arabic, Japanese Sign Language and Japanese, Indonesian Sign Language and Bahasa Indonesia, British Sign Language and English). This shows both the “success factors” and the challenges in establishing communication under such circumstances.

Both of these settings are being explored at the International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies through projects under the European Science Foundation and the European Research Council respectively. There are interesting common considerations in that these phenomena showcase the impressive linguistic creativity and skills used by deaf people who adapt to various communication situations, and these considerations have relevance for the field of cognitive linguistics.