

Language Attitudes of the British Deaf Community: Attitudes towards British Sign Language and Sign Supported English

Katherine Rowley, Jordan Fenlon and Kearsy Cormier

To date, there has been relatively little information about language attitudes in deaf communities and claims about the language attitudes of BSL (British Sign Language) users have been largely anecdotal (e.g. Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999). Here we describe language attitudes in the British Deaf community using data from the interview component of the BSL Corpus (Schembri, Fenlon, Rentelis & Cormier 2011). Few studies on sign languages have empirically studied deaf people's attitudes towards their sign language beyond its relationship to spoken language – e.g. prescriptivism, accommodation. Here, we focus specifically on the Deaf community's attitudes regarding BSL and English-based sign systems such as Signed Supported English (SSE) and how their responses relate to their own demographic backgrounds. Signers were asked: 'What do you think the following terms mean: British Sign Language or BSL, Sign Supported English or SSE? Please explain, including examples of how they differ'. All of the data was translated from BSL to English in ELAN and a thematic analysis was carried out on selected questions in order to study the Deaf community's attitudes to BSL.

Results based on 80 responses to the BSL/SSE question reveal clear differences in the attitudes towards BSL and SSE. There seems to be a conflict in how participants viewed BSL and SSE and how they thought BSL and SSE should be used. For example, most participants described BSL as 'visual', 'animated' and 'expressive'. They also considered BSL to be a 'natural language' and stated that their preferred language was BSL. SSE was often considered to be 'English', a 'series of signs that followed English word order', and 'lacking in facial expression'. Some participants expressed that they did not enjoy watching SSE and that SSE was 'artificial', 'rigid'. On the other hand, several participants reported that they felt BSL was most appropriate for social situations and that SSE is vital for education. It is interesting that generally, participants had a negative view of SSE but regarded it as important for education, for teaching deaf children literacy. Despite their own views of BSL and/or SSE, many of the respondents reported that they were able to adapt their signing to suit their conversational partner's needs.

It is possible that educational policies in the United Kingdom has shaped how the deaf community views BSL and SSE. Most deaf people have not been formally educated using BSL. Traditionally, educators have mainly adopted spoken English or English based signing to educate deaf children and this seems to have had an impact on the deaf community's attitudes to BSL and SSE. A few of the respondents, who received formal training to become BSL tutors, commented that they realised the value of BSL after attending teacher training courses. This clearly shows that education impacts language ideologies. Ladd (1988) also reported that BSL users held BSL with higher regard after linguists reported that BSL is rule governed just like spoken languages are. Findings overall suggest that there are clear emerging themes such as accommodation, prescriptivism and specific attitudes towards BSL and SSE.