



Perspectives on the Concept and Definition of International Sign



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1. Foreword

During the discussion at the General Assembly (GA) of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in Montreal 2003, several countries challenged the use of 'International Sign Language'. Some countries argued that more research was needed before it could be regarded as a language. There was a clear division between delegates who supported the use of the term "language" and those who did not. The GA voted 20-15, with five (5) abstentions, in favour of using the term 'International Sign'.

According to a decision of the Board of WFD, January 2007, Mr Tomas Hedberg and Dr Joseph Murray were commissioned to make a questionnaire, conduct a survey and to work with WFD Experts on Sign Language during the Spring of 2007 to follow up on the request to come to an agreement regarding the term International Sign. Preliminary survey results on International Sign (IS) were presented by Tomas Hedberg at a workshop before the GA in Madrid Summer 2007. It turned out that a majority of the delegates recommended that the term IS be used. In connection with a revision of the statutes of WFD, it had also been decided to put in the term IS in the statutes and to use the term IS for general and official meetings.

In October 2007 it was decided that there would be a written report of the survey. Dr Johanna Mesch was willing to make a compilation of the survey results on International Sign during 2009.

WFD would like to thank the following people: Mr Tomas Hedberg and Dr Joseph Murray, WFD Board members, for their implementation of a survey of the concept of IS; Dr Johanna Mesch for her work with the compilation of the survey results on IS and Mr Colin Allen for his voluntary work on the layout. The report was also sent to the WFD Sign Language Experts for their comments. WFD also would like to thank Robert Adam, Karin Hoyer, Verena Krausneker, Sam Lutalo and Mats Jonsson for their comments during April 2010. Finally WFD would also like to thank 20 sign language researchers and interpreters who voluntarily answered questions and contributed their views on the concept of IS during the Spring of 2007. Their responses were very valuable for the WFD.



Markku Jokinen
WFD President



2. Introduction

International Sign (IS) is commonly used at the General Assembly (GA) of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and of the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf, and also in many other international meetings and events. The status of International Sign as a language has been debated for a long time due to its flexibility and possibilities as a communication system. A dictionary of *Gestuno* (The British Association of the Deaf 1975) was published for use in international communication, especially for conferences. It had a limited vocabulary, and did not include any grammar. The system of Gestuno itself is no longer used to communicate. *International Sign Language* (ISL) is the other most used term. Today, the term International Sign (IS) is preferred because IS varies depending on the language background of the signers who use it.

Studies on international communication in sign language and interpreting in international meetings and events have shown that grammatical features of IS are highly complex and make use of the same structures that natural sign languages share (e.g. Bergmann 1990, Woll 1990, Allsop, Woll & Brauti 1994, Webb & Supalla 1994, Supalla and Webb 1995, Moody 2002, Locker McKee and Napier 2002, Rosenstock 2004, 2005). Still some researchers have argued that more research is needed especially on face-to-face communication and describing IS in different parts of the world. Following hesitations regarding usage of the terms in official presentations, WFD decided to conduct a survey. According to a decision from the Board of WFD, Tomas Hedberg and Joseph Murray were commissioned to work with WFD experts in Sign Language to follow up on the request to come to an agreement regarding the term IS.

A questionnaire of 16 questions (see Appendix 1) was sent out to WFD experts in Sign Language, sign linguists and interpreters in the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) in 16 countries during Spring 2007. Responses to the survey questionnaire were received from 24 of 35 respondents in 12 countries; Australia, Brazil, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and USA. Some interpreters from South Africa and Kenya were involved through WASLI.

Seven (7/24) are Deaf linguists or work with sign language. Three (3/20) answered that the questionnaire was not easy to answer. Question No 10 was not clear to most of the respondents.

Four (4/24) sent feedback that they could not respond to some of the questions, because their experience of IS/ISL was too limited, or the questions were too huge, or not very clear. One linguist argued that “There are some assumptions in the questions themselves about what ‘a language’ is that would need to be picked apart by someone who really wants to try and answer.”

3. Definition of International Sign

All respondents have various definitions of IS and various opinions about whether it is a language or not. There is a distinction between IS within a group who meets regularly and IS as cross-sign communication (ad hoc signing) with people who don't know other sign languages or IS. Anyway, the degree of conventionalisation is critical to the status of IS as a language.

Below are some selected important quotations from the survey responses:

This applies to the form of international signing that is used by people with regular exposure to international-level meetings.

It is a form of contact signing.

It fulfils all criteria of human language (design features of language as in Hockett 1966).

It has a sufficiently high level of conventionalisation. The level of conventionalisation is lower than in national sign languages, but higher than in other kinds of cross-sign communication.

Fluent users of International Sign regard this as a communication option on par with national sign languages; for instance, they will make an explicit choice between using IS or a national SL.

It is a hybrid code that is improvised in particular times and places, between particular participants. This temporary usage means the form of IS is too variable or unpredictable to be named "a language" in the sense of a conventional system (even though conventional languages do contain internal variation).

Natural language is defined as a communication system that is passed on through generations, transmitted by the parents and naturally acquired by children. There are no native users of IS as a first language.

It is not used in all areas of daily life.

IS is a language-like, dynamic and complex communication system that is used in specific settings. It results from intensive contact between national sign languages.

It is an artificial symbol-based system of basic communication.

There are really enormous differences between what is called IS in Asia and what is called IS in Europe.

4. The vocabulary and grammar of International Sign

The IS lexicon is indeed limited and its grammatical structure is undoubtedly complex.

There is a small vocabulary but for the most part if users are in 2-way conversation (not giving a lecture) they use a wide range of paraphrases instead of simple lexical items.

I have observed a change in lexical items over the years [...] and I have seen less and less signs from the Gestuno book used at conferences.

I think that the IS lexicon draws on three different sources: 1. ASL as one of the main (lexifier) languages, 2. Ad hoc choice of whatever signs seem most iconic or is available at the time to the users in the conversation; they may come from any national sign language, 3. Signs made up on the fly during a conversation, which may not exist in any national sign language.

The established conference vocabulary is very limited (I am guessing maybe 2000 to 3000 signs...?)

It is certainly possible to establish a standardized list of frequently-used vocabulary words. But teaching a list of particular signs to others is perhaps not an easy task.

IS users rely on classifiers more than other users of national sign languages.

It has grammatical features but these are taken from the sign languages of the users of IS.

Colour is often expressed by pointing to an exemplar of that colour. It is less easy to export a non-iconic sign from a sign language into IS since it will require more paraphrasing.

...choices are more limited for such concepts, and one has to resort to either commonly known signs (e.g. from ASL), to finger spelling in a commonly known written language, or to metaphors and or longer explanations.

It may not be necessary for IS to have a single, ideal sign for a concept. What is important is the success of communication itself.

Since there is not a homogeneous community that uses IS frequently, regularly, and in all areas of daily life, this process of conventionalization cannot happen spontaneously, as in natural SL.

I think there are different varieties of IS around. The more regular contact is between a group of international deaf people, the more likely they are to develop their own stable variety.[...] Over time, our IS always changes and different sign languages have more influence at different times.

5. Pidgin or Creole?

Most of the respondents don't agree International Sign is a pidgin or a Creole. A typical pidgin is a combination of two or more languages, and consists of a large vocabulary and a simplified grammar. An example of this kind of (spoken) language is Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea near Indonesia (Romaine 1992). One of the criteria for a Creole is that it is transmitted across generations such as from parents to children.

IS can neither be called a pidgin nor a Creole. These definitions include detailed descriptions of structural features (pidgins tend to have a large vocabulary and a simplified grammar - the exact opposite of IS) and the natural transmission process (language acquisition in the case of Creoles).

Most of the grammar is just exported from the signer's own grammar, and for the remaining part, signers found it impossible to agree on constituent boundaries.

It's a communication system that uses and mixes lexicon from different (sign) languages with a mixture of grammatical features from those languages depending on the interpreters knowledge of sign languages and the audience.

I concur with Rosenstock (2004) when she suggests that IS is more like a kione which is a system of shared syntax. Pidgin usually refers to pooling words from two different languages for easy communication. IS is not like that - it taps into the spatio-visual grammatical features that appear to exist across signed languages (such as directing verbs, use of non-manual signals, etc.)

6. Transmitting information with International Sign

It is easier to process information received in a national sign language than in IS. Some reasons are quoted below:

...there is no well-established lexical storage in IS. This means, it seems more difficult to process information. However, of course, this depends on the discourse mode. For example, storytelling in IS (i.e. in the narrative mode) does not require heavy use of lexical items but relies on the heavy use of classifiers, iconic mapping and gestures.

I believe that based in the linguistic limitations of IS (smaller lexicon, less conventionalized aspects), in interpreted situations some of the content of the source message gets lost in the translation process.

How much can be expressed in IS? It was obvious that 80% to 95% of the information is successfully transmitted now after 30 years of IS interpreter development. Very successful in international meetings when the audience is experienced with international conferences and when the interpreters are professional and experienced.

The usage of IS is limited to the purposes determined by the workings of the WFD and CISS/ISCD (and other international organisations) and thus has never developed into the full-fledged language like ASL or NGT (Sign Language of the Netherlands) have.

In international sports or international sign language linguistics gatherings, different terms will be used for specific needs, and it is not necessary to consider IS a single variety. WFD SIGN as a meeting language includes the signs needed for the regular meetings of Deaf people in the WFD.

In 2-way conversation, there is constant adjustment to ensure understanding - hence a high use of repetition, paraphrasing, etc. In lectures where is limited feedback available, IS is not adjusted to suit the recipient.

Being able to communicate at this level in IS requires one of two things: either the IS user is highly skilled as indicated under 7, e.g. knowing several national sign languages, having a very high degree of meta-linguistic awareness and skill etc.

7. About teaching and learning International Sign

There are some concerns regarding whether it is a good idea to have IS courses and how it is taught or learned.

I am concerned about colleges/universities offering IS courses - Exactly what is being taught? Who is teaching this? Will deaf people be trained to be IS interpreters? (IS interpreters is a problematic label.)

IS is used as the language of face-to-face instruction (e.g. a course in Applied Sign Linguistics for students from different countries).

Learning a native sign language from deaf parents may not be sufficient for skilful shifting to IS register, but experience in situations interacting with deaf people who do not share a common sign language would be useful.

Our research showed that the best predictor of ability to use IS is to have experience of international travel and contact with foreign deaf people. Being a native signer on its own didn't help with using IS.

But, I wouldn't say "required" I would say it "helps" to be a native user of a sign language. Some interpreters are not native users of a sign language but are excellent IS users.

8. Some thoughts comparing American Sign Language and International Sign as lingua franca

There are some discussions regarding which language is/should be used in international cross-communication.

It would be preferable to promote the use of a specific sign language (the most likely candidate would be ASL) as an international language in conference settings (similarly to how English functions for hearing people attending conferences).

My impression is that IS has become less IS and more international kind of ASL, especially in lectures but also informally.

Knowing ASL does not guarantee successful communication in IS.

IS is a great way for networking. If it allows people to communicate with each other easily, then why not encourage it? However, I do agree with many who claim that we should preserve national sign languages. This should be made clear to the international deaf community. Besides, it is a good way to avoid using ASL as the lingua franca.

9. Conclusions

This is only a survey of the respondents' opinions but some linguists have also reported various results and opinions about the status of IS. There is a difference between the report based on the WFD questionnaire on opinions and linguistic research on IS (e.g. Rosenstock 2004; 2005). It is not an easy task to find a conclusive answer to this question.

The main result in this survey shows that *International Sign Language* is considered not to be a language, but something language-like. A high number of respondents have replied that the term *International Sign (IS)* is the best choice to avoid confusion. Some respondents would like to call it *contact language*. One linguist argues that the signing of *WFD SIGN* would mean that used at WFD meetings, while the phrase International Sign will have its own general meaning. Another respondent says that there are two different types of communication: conventionalized IS and informal communication between the users of national sign languages.

WFD is encouraged to support the recognition and development of natural signed languages, and not to give *International Sign (IS)* language status. IS is used only for formal and internal meetings. It is not recommended that lexicalized signs be borrowed from IS to national sign languages. More research in the usage of IS and other sign languages in international settings is needed to understand how communication across different sign languages works.

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11. Appendix

Stockholm 2007-01-15

Regarding International Sign (IS),

Background

During the discussion at the previous General Assembly (GA) of WFD in Montreal 2003, several countries challenged the use of "International Sign Language". Some countries argued that more research was needed before it could be regarded as a language. There was a clear division between delegates supporting the use of the word "language" and those that do not. It was agreed to leave the wording as it is in the proposed revisions. The GA voted 20-15, with 5 abstentions, in favour of using the term 'International Signs'. The GA expressed its desire that the matter should be put on the agenda for revision at GA 2007 in Madrid 2007, and in the meantime more discussions could take place. Finland suggested a milder form of wording be used: "ISL shall be used as a meeting language".

According to the decision from the Board of WFD, I, Tomas Hedberg, was commissioned to work with WFD Experts in Sign Language to follow up on the GA's request to investigate the status of International Signs as a language, for further discussion at the next GA.

In order to receive a collection of your opinions before a suggestion is made, whether it will be called International Sign Language (ISL) or keeping the name of International Signs (IS), the questionnaires with 16 different questions will be sent to WFD Experts and some Sign Language researcher.

Please send your answers to us as soon as possible, preferably before 22nd February, at the latest via email.

Please, find the attached questionnaire.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation!

Regards

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Questionnaire

International Sign Language (ISL) vs. International Sign (IS)

1. Can IS be regarded as a language or not?
Please give some arguments
2. Which criteria do you use to define a language and how If does IS fulfil this criteria?
(If you consider it as a language in general, which criteria will be required and fulfilled?)
3. If IS is not a language, what will you call it instead?
Some suggestions: 'Code system', 'Meeting language', 'International Sign language communication', 'Contact language' or 'Formalized system'.
4. Does IS have grammatical features, like national sign languages?
5. Does IS have a set (fast) vocabulary and lexical features, like national sign languages?
6. Do you think that IS have linguistic variations, depending on meeting connections, such as CISS, WFD, DHI, Deaf Academic researcher, interpersonal?
7. Is there a difference formal and informal IS as registered?
8. Even if one knows IS, is it more difficult to process information received in IS than information in national sign language in connection with visual perception?

(Concerning visual perception, do you think that you can receive the same information on IS as compared to with national sign languages?)
9. For IS seems to have difficulty choosing between different signs for common signs which are not iconic, such as colour, interrogative, and day of the week? Has this been your observation as well?
10. It seems that there are repeated signs/meanings or some signs in IS for different sign language users, such as for example the sign for 'important' and 'culture' and so on? Is it more characteristic than national sign languages?
11. Is it correct to say that the choice of signs is suited to the background and linguistic knowledge of the recipient?
12. Is IS regarded as a pidgin language? If you think that IS is a language, could it be equivalent to some type of Creole language?
13. Is it correct to say that any communication functions as pidgin in the beginning, and that for it to be regarded as a language, it requires 2-3 generations?
14. In order to understand International signs better and easier is it required that you have a native sign language earlier as your first language (L1)?
15. Have you other issues regarding the use of IS that you wish to draw attention to?
16. Would you like to add any comments on IS/ISL?