

Possibilities and limitations of historical descriptions of signs for research on sign language change

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Sign languages emerge through the social interactions of deaf people. In the past, the term "sign language" held various meanings. For instance, in the 19th century, "home signs" or "signs accompanying spoken language" were often referred to as "sign language." In contemporary linguistics, the term "sign language" is employed to emphasize that sign languages are full-fledged, natural languages.

As early as the 19th century, it was observed that deaf individuals from different regions used distinct signs. Simultaneously, however, it was also believed that deaf individuals worldwide used a universal sign language. It is now understood that there are distinct national sign languages. It is also acknowledged that within each sign language, regional and social variations exist, and that sign languages evolve over time.

The technology to film sign language conversations did not become available until the early 20th century. Therefore, studying how deaf individuals signed in the 19th century presents a challenge. However, two options are available: the analysis of depictions of signs (illustrations) or the study of written descriptions of signs (texts).

In the 19th century, some teachers of the deaf documented the production of certain signs. These descriptions are sometimes quite detailed, raising doubts about whether such elaborate manual articulations were used in everyday interactions. In other instances, the descriptions are brief and vague, making it difficult for readers to visualize how specific signs were performed. Certain descriptions indicate that some signs are produced very differently today, while others suggest that little change has occurred over time.

Historical descriptions of signs are fascinating documents because they provide insights into the cultural and social life of the 19th century. Moreover, they are highly valuable for linguistic research on sign language change, as they indicate that many signs have become more abstract over the past 200 years—an observation that warrants further investigation.

When working with historical descriptions of signs, it is important to consider that a sign described in a particular way at a given time may not have been performed in the same manner in everyday use. Nonetheless, historical descriptions of signs merit greater attention in linguistic studies of sign language change.