SLAAASh and the ASL Deaf Communities (or "so many gifs!")

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Abstract

The project Sign Language Acquisition, Annotation, Archiving and Sharing (SLAAASh) is a model for working with diverse ASL Deaf communities in all stages of the project. In this presentation, I highlight key steps in achieving this level of collaboration. First, I discuss the importance of sharing work with the community—a key form of reciprocity recognized by Deaf communities. Second, I discuss the importance of reflecting diversity, e.g., ensuring that ASL Signbank actors vary in age, gender, ethnicity, body type, and language experience. Third, I discuss the importance of incorporating feedback from stakeholders and show how the ASL Signbank actors have expressed different views that have impacted our development of the Signbank. Finally, I discuss the crucial component of building substantive community connections and maintaining them long-term. I end by discussing our own efforts to build community connections to date as well as planned future ones.

1. Introduction

Sign Language Acquisition, Annotation, Archiving and Sharing (SLAAASh) is a four-year project (2015-2019). Its intent is to systematize annotations and make available to researchers a set of previously recorded longitudinal spontaneous production ASL data with accompanying metadata, annotations, and descriptive analyses. Annotation conventions have been inherited from prior projects as detailed in Chen Pichler, Hochgesang, Lill-Martin & Quadros (2010) but revised based on current best practices for sign language documentation (Chen Pichler, Hochgesang, Lillo-Martin, 2015). With the help of the technical team that built the NGT Signbank, a Signbank has been developed for ASL (Hochgesang, Crasborn, and Lillo-Martin, 2017). To date, almost 40 percent of the acquisition video data has been annotated, community input has been collected on reconsenting and sharing protocol (Chen Pichler et al., 2016; 2016), and over 2700 entries have been added to the ASL Signbank.

As evidenced by the reconsenting and sharing protocol already reported (Chen Pichler et al., 2016; 2016), SLAAASh believes it is essential to work with the signed language communities throughout all stages of the project, continually reporting progress and seeking input (e.g., Harris, Holmes & Mertens, 2009). This paper presents the ways that the SLAAASh project has worked with the ASL Deaf communities. First, I discuss the importance of sharing work with the community—a key form of reciprocity called for by Deaf communities. Second, I discuss the importance of reflecting the diversity found in those communities. For example, ensuring that ASL Signbank actors vary in age, gender, ethnicity, body type, and language experience. Third, I discuss the importance of incorporating feedback from stakeholders and show how the ASL Signbank actors, in expressing their individual views, have impacted our development of the Signbank. Finally, I discuss the crucial component of building substantive community connections and maintaining them long-term. I will end by discussing our own efforts to build community connections to date as well as planned future ones.

2. How We Share the Work We Do With the Community

Through the usual academic channels of workshops, conferences, and papers, SLAAASh has started to report on its activities (e.g., Hochgesang et al., 2017). These channels, however, are not as accessible to Deaf communities. Therefore, SLAAASh has used Twitter (@ASLSLAASH) to steadily stream project news, most particularly updates to the ASL Signbank.

Pictures and animated GIFs are used to introduce ASL Signbank actors (Figure 1), ASL signs and even the name sign of the Signbank itself. Providing information in written English alone does not provide enough access to the community. Putting aside the varying levels of literacy skills of Deaf people, the language we are looking at – ASL - simply does not have a conventionalized written system that can be used to fully and adequately represent it. Since Twitter allows for mixed media, different digital tools can and should be used to share information – typed text, pictures, videos, and animated GIFs. While videos and animated GIFs are ideal for transmitting signed messages, they cannot be used solely because they are not searchable without written text (as any person working with signed

corpora knows).

https://twitter.com/aslslaash/status/757641765109149696

Figure 1. Example of tweet introducing one of the actors for the ASL Signbank

The name sign for the ASL Signbank even evolved because of the GIF alone. At each filming for the Signbank or presentation about the Signbank, GIFs of the ASL Signbank name sign were taken or shared. Discussions always followed, thus leading to an evolution of the name sign itself.

Figure 2. Examples of GIFs for the "ASL Signbank" name sign

Name signs are usually designated by members of Deaf communities. While a name sign could be decided by a single person, it also can evolve through discussion and negotiation with other members. At a guest lecture for the National Association of the Deaf (2017), I introduced the ASL Signbank to the staff and demonstrated the name sign that was current then – as Figure 2 shows it was a combination of SIGN and FS(bank). The NAD members were not keen on having fingerspelling as part of the name sign so they offered their own version seen in Figure 3 below. They chose another version of the word "to sign". The one in Figure 2 is a more neutral and noun-like version referring to the general ability to sign or the modality itself; the one in Figure 3 is more related to the sense of using a word (or sign) itself and is often used to identify people who can sign fluently or are "closer to the Deaf community" than others.
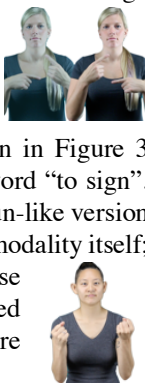

Figure 3. NAD suggestion for ASL Signbank name sign

Then the NAD staff chose a depicting sign to represent "bank" in a way that refers to putting things in a repository rather than the financial institutions as signified by the English word "bank". When I shared this name sign with

yet other audiences, they appeared to approve on the artistry or novelty of this expression and for using it to describe the ASL Signbank. But for referring to the ASL Signbank (or using it as a name), there was a preference for a more "streamlined" sign as a name sign rather than a phrase. The name sign suggested by NAD was modified so that the first word ("to sign") became a one-handed version (although the sign usually resists weak hand drop) and combined with a one-handed depicting sign that indicates a list. This new name sign, shown in Figure 4, can be reproduced as two-handed and moved in a way to indicate pride or just one-handed for plain reference.

Figure 4. The latest name sign for the ASL Signbank

The new name sign has the added (and coincidental) bonus of resembling the letters ✋ ("s") and 🖐 ("b") in the manual alphabet used in ASL.

This ongoing dialogue with the community members and the evolution of the name sign for the ASL Signbank exemplify the first two principles of the Sign Language Communities' Terms of Reference (SLCTR) by Harris, Holmes and Mertens (2009) :"(t)he authority for the construction of meanings and knowledge within the Sign Language community rests with the community's members" and the second principle, "(i)nvestigators should acknowledge that Sign Language community members have the right to have those things that they value to be fully considered in all interactions" (115).

Sharing research done on signed languages is essential. Deaf communities appreciate (if not often demand) reciprocity (e.g., Harris et al., 2009, 115). If the Deaf communities contribute a part of their lives by demonstrating how they use their language, then the researchers need to reciprocate by sharing the work built on this language use in an accessible manner. Academic products like articles or conference proceedings are not as accessible as social media channels (e.g., Twitter or Facebook). Sharing the work done by SLAAASh via Twitter made it possible to enter into a rich and ongoing exchange about how to refer to a lexical database. While we have the academic spoken/written name of the product, we now also have a name sign, something that is valued by American Deaf communities.

3.   Diversity in the ASL Signbank

Clearly every community is diverse. While we can identify features that characterize a certain community, this does not mean the communities are homogenous (e.g., Harris et al., 2009). Although there may be necessary generalizations, any work with language needs to reflect the diversity of the communities. For example, we say that

ASL is the sign language of the Deaf community in America. But the truth is there are multiple varieties for the multiple Deaf communities in America. The lines are not always easily drawn. Nor are the communities neatly mapped onto the different varieties. Unsurprisingly so because identities are intersectional and signers can choose to use specific variants depending on who they are interacting with and why – what Eckert calls "speaker agency" (Eckert, 2008). Any language documentation project is then ethically obligated to reflect the authentic diversity of the researched language communities. Perfect representation (for anything), for countless reasons, is impossible to attain but the ongoing, transparent and reflective attempt to recognize and represent different experiences in itself is valuable. I discuss two ways we do so with SLAAASh – ensuring diversity of signers in the ASL Signbank and representing any and all ASL signs that are in the corpora using the ASL Signbank.

3.1 Diversity of the ASL Signbank Actors

The source of the lexical items included in the ASL Signbank, of course, comes from the primary data of the SLAAASh project (child ASL acquisition videos as well as other kinds of videos associated with the other projects that use the ASL Signbank, e.g., Philadelphia Signs Project). The original videos, for both confidentiality and quality issues, cannot be edited and re-used as ASL Signbank videos to represent the lexical items themselves. Thus it is necessary to hire actors to produce clear, isolated and unmodified (e.g. for grammatical aspect) forms of the signs that can be used in representative movies in the ASL Signbank (much like how we have the basic form of a word as headwords or "lemmas" in dictionaries).

Our actors are native or early users of ASL (early meaning preferably the user acquired ASL before the age of four). The current lineup of ASL Signbank actors (shown in Figure 5) is approaching representation of the different Deaf communities in America who use ASL.

Because we do not have reliable survey demographic data, it is not possible to discuss whether the ASL Signbank actor demographics are proportionate to the American Deaf communities. Since the ASL Signbank itself is not a corpus, that is not really a concern in terms of corpus representativeness. However, because ASL Signbank is a representation of the ASL lexicon, the actors themselves do need to be diverse because the American Deaf communities are. Thus, our signers vary in age, gender, ethnicity[1] and body type (as is demonstrated in Figure 5).

They also vary in kinds of "language experience", which, in this paper, means the age of acquisition along with the type of language input.

Figure 5. Current lineup of ASL Signbank actors

While SLAAASh requires that the ASL Signbank actors have had acquired ASL before the age of four, there are no other requirement because we recognize that the language experiences of the American Deaf communities are varied – some are raised in hearing families, some are hearing themselves with Deaf parents, and et cetera. They all make up the American Deaf community experience.

3.2 Diversity of Lexical Items in the ASL Signbank

Since the ASL Signbank is a research tool, specifically a lexical database that can be linked directly to annotation software, it needs to be able to handle whatever comes up in the data. That means sometimes including forms that some members of the American Deaf communities may not consider part of their ASL use. One simple example is regional variants, e.g., the *soda/pop/etc* variants in American English. The different ASL variants for "birthday" in Figure 6 is an example of this kind of regional variation.

Figure 6. ASL regional variants for "birthday"

In addition to including all regional variants that occur in the corpora using the ASL Signbank, there will be a feedback function when the ASL Signbank is made public where users can contribute their own regional variants.

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[1] On a personal note, there was something my student said a few years back. "It means a lot to see someone that looks like me up there on the screen. I don't usually see that." She was a person of color and felt under-represented in presentations and publications about signed languages. She was struck by my class presentation which included people of varying ethnic backgrounds. It made me even more dedicated to ensure a wide representation of users in my own work.

Another example of variation in ASL results from the influence of spoken languages or invented manual codes used in education to represent these spoken languages. As shown in Figure 7, the sign for "the" is an example of this influence from a manual code intended to help written English in American Deaf education.
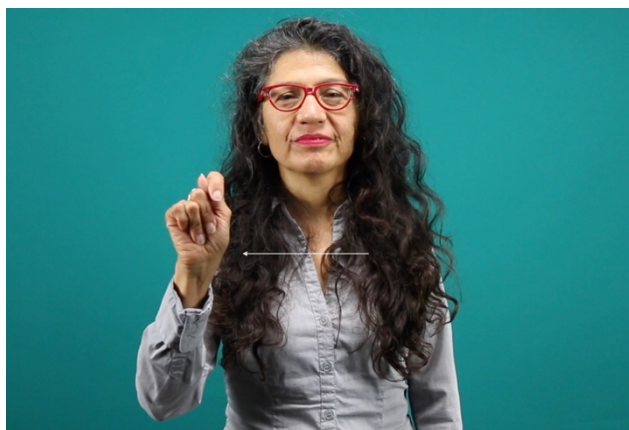

Figure 7. Sign for "the"

The use of these forms can be quite controversial in the American Deaf communities and invoke discussions about which signs are "real" or "right". Being a usage-based and descriptive research tool, the ASL Signbank includes all variants that arise in the data. But being mindful of the uncomfortable issues they can incite in the American Deaf communities, the SLAAASh research project adds information to the ASL Signbank to reflect current language attitudes (see Hochgesang, Crasborn, and Lillo-

Martin this volume for more on the ASL Signbank design). For example, in the *morphosyntax* section, the "derivation history" field can be used to categorize signs as being initialized (i.e., signed with the handshape that represents the first letter of the ambient spoken language) or fingerspelled. We also will add a "usage" section in which we can add memos reporting observations shared by the community, like usage notes in dictionaries ("polite", "vulgar slang", "offensive", "old-fashioned"). This strategy allows us to navigate language attitudes while accurately representing the data.

4. Views of ASL Signbank Actors Feeding Back Into Our Work

It is also important to consider ASL users' attitudes toward various signs while accurately representing the data (e.g., Harris, Holmes and Mertens, 2009). One way the SLAAASh project has been able to do this is through dialogues with the ASL Signbank actors during filming sessions.

Some of the ASL Signbank actors sometimes expressed discomfort with producing certain variants during filming. Perhaps they just did not know these variants and they felt too unfamiliar for their hands. Or others were current ASL teachers who did not want to film certain signs that could be used against them in their professional work. Yet other signs were considered to be offensive or taboo. The actors either opted out of filming those (with our full support) or filmed them with the understanding that a "disclaimer" would be posted on the website specifying that these signs are not necessarily the typical productions of the actors
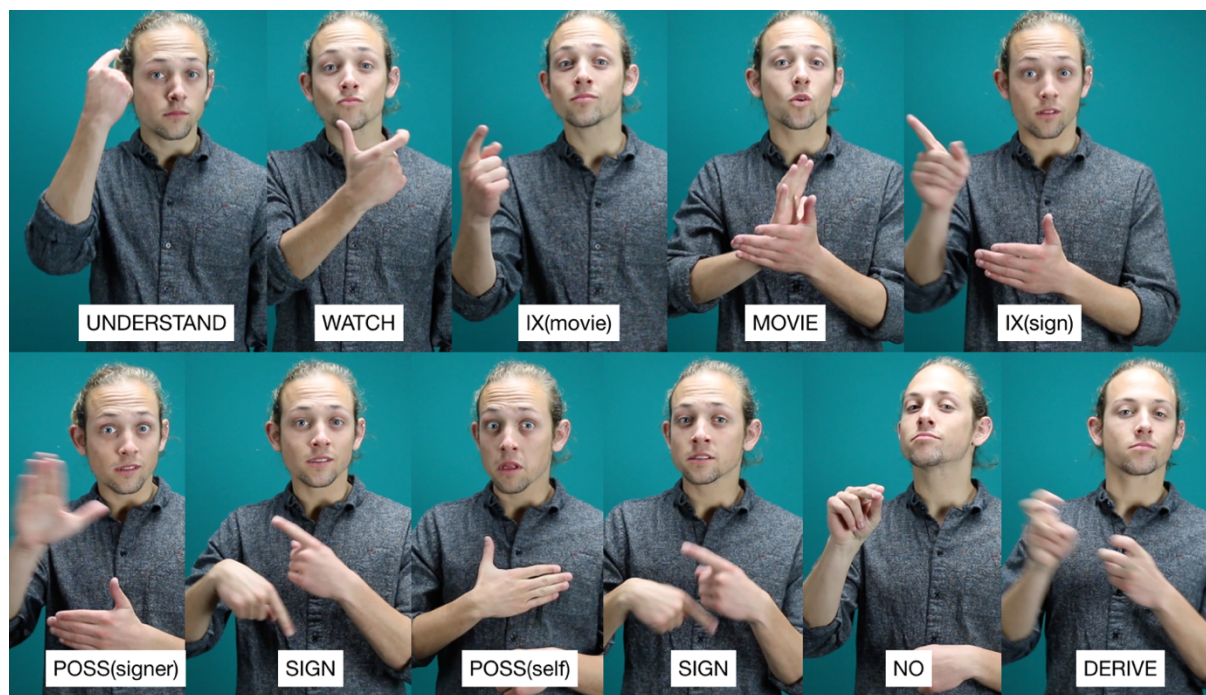
"When you watch the videos, remember that these signs may not be the signs that the actors actually use. They are just re-producing what appeared in the primary data."

Figure 8. Example of disclaimer that will be displayed on the ASL Signbank website

themselves. This is just one example of the discussions that arose from the ASL Signbank filming.

We intend to include brief videos on the ASL Signbank website that has resulted from these discussions - that the signers are actors, that the database is not a dictionary but a research tool and so on. For example, Figure 8 is a series of stills taken from a brief video explaining that signs produced by the actors in the ASL Signbank may not be the variants they actually use.

5. Community Connections

Finally, there are several community connections to the project, both ongoing and ones planned for the future. For example, we will give presentations to the community with information about the ASL Signbank and how it can be used for personal interest, teaching ASL, Deaf education, and other extended uses. These presentations will be made available online as well as face-to-face, in order to reach a wider audience (and they will be announced on @ASLSLAASH). Members of the ASL community will be included in the Advisory Board that will review applications to access the acquisition data, and they will serve as advisors to the online repository for the acquisition data. Other projects are already making use of the ASL SignBank for their own purposes, including Philadelphia Signs, multiple departments at Gallaudet (e.g., Linguistics, Department of Interpretation and Translation, ASL and Deaf Studies, and Education), sign language researchers from Eastern Kentucky University, and Boston University, and some early educators of Deaf children. Access to the SignBank will be under a Creative Commons license (https://aslsignbank.haskins.yale.edu//about/copyright/) through which users will be encouraged to share their own work making use of the ASL Signbank, to further enrich American Deaf communities.

6. Conclusion

As already mentioned throughout the paper, I refer to the SLCTR developed by Harris et al. (2009) throughout my own work. Harris et al. (ibid) discuss the ethics of research, particularly with un- or under-represented groups and specifically with signed language communities. They also propose a set of "culturally appropriate research guidelines" intended to accord respect and show sensitivity towards the studied group's culture. They are not the only resource available to the signed language researcher who wishes to consider ethical aspects of working with signed language communities. *Working Together – Manual for Sign Language Work within Development Cooperation* (http://www.slwmanual.info) presents guidelines in both English and International Sign. Also, our own work from the SLAAASh project described here stands as a model for ethical considerations when working with signed language communities. Whatever the resource, it is necessary to continually engage and involve the relevant Deaf communities however possible. The languages we research come from their own hands and lives.

7. Acknowledgements

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10. Appendix – Sign Language Communities' Terms of Reference (SLCTR) Principles

The six principles of the Sign Language Communities' Terms of Reference (SLCTR):

1. The authority for the construction of meanings and knowledge within the Sign Language community rests with the community's members.

2. Investigators should acknowledge that Sign Language community members have the right to have those things that they value to be fully considered in all interactions.

3. Investigators should take into account the worldviews of the Sign Language community in all negotiations or dealings that impact on the community's members.

4. In the application of Sign Language communities' terms of reference, investigators should recognize the diverse experiences, understandings, and way of life (in sign language societies) that reflect their contemporary cultures.

5. Investigators should ensure that the views and perceptions of the critical reference group (the sign language group) is reflected in any process of validating and evaluating the extent to which Sign Language communities' terms of reference have been taken into account.

6. Investigators should negotiate within and among sign language groups to establish appropriate processes to consider and determine the criteria for deciding how to meet cultural imperatives, social needs, and priorities.

(Harris, Holmes, Mertens 2009, 115).

11. Appendix – Author's Positionality

I am a Deaf American woman born to a hearing white family in the late 1970's. My parents learned a variety of American Sign Language with me – one that was influenced by the popular belief then that a manual code (Signed Exact English) should be used to facilitate the learning of English. I attended mainstreamed schools from kindergarten throughout high school although the type of program and services varied –a " total-communication" self-contained (i.e., only with deaf students requiring the same kind of services) program with other students (mostly hard of hearing or oral) ; as a single student with an interpreter in all-hearing classes ; in a mainstreamed program with other Deaf students who used American Sign Language but usually not taking self-contained classes. I wanted to transfer to a Deaf residential school but was advised not to because I would have had to move up two academic grades. Through different interactive opportunities (Deaf camps, Deaf community theatre, and Deaf social events), I was able to interact daily with the Deaf communities in Northern Illinois. By the time I was in high school, I started to actively reject speech therapy and manual codes for English – taking pride in my use of American Sign Language (although I remained a passionate reader of written English literature). For college, I went to California State University at Northridge – at that time it had a large Deaf program – about 200 Deaf students. After graduating, I joined the Peace Corps and lived in Kenya where I taught at a Deaf school for two years. I learned their signed language – Kenyan Sign Language (which bears historical influence from American Sign Language, British Sign Language, Swedish Sign Language, and possibly others). Upon return to the States, I attended Gallaudet for graduate school in linguistics and got my PhD. I also taught in the ASL and Deaf Studies program. After two years I transferred to the linguistics department where I am now an assistant professor. During my time at Gallaudet, I also married a hearing black man (I consider myself an ally of the LGBT community) and have two multi-racial boys. I also have had several language documentation experiences with multiple Deaf communities – both American and international. *All of these experiences have shaped me and instilled in me a deep respect for diversity and individual experiences.*

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https://twitter.com/jahochcam/status/828415245421047812