

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Central Lancashire</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: UOA 28 Modern Languages and Linguistics</p>
<p>Title of case study: Working with vulnerable deaf communities to support the vitality of endangered rural sign languages</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) The International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies (iSLanDS) has led a large consortium conducting the first-ever substantial comparative study on endangered sign languages in small-scale rural communities with long-standing hereditary deafness (“village sign languages”). The global impact of this work is seen primarily in the domain of language endangerment through work with UNESCO, with the Foundation for Endangered Languages, and with the World Federation of the Deaf. This work also leads to improved educational attainment and professional development for the marginalised users of these sign languages, and the promotion of their linguistic rights.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Since 2004, intensive work on small-scale sign languages in rural communities with long-standing hereditary deafness has been undertaken in work led by Zeshan. All of these village sign languages are endangered or on the brink of extinction, so their documentation is urgent. The iSLanDS Institute has led an international consortium of five universities in 2009-2013, working on the first major comparative study of this unique group of languages involving field sites in 10 different countries, funded through the European Science Foundation’s EUROCORES scheme (EuroBABEL strand). This is the first study of its kind, and data from these languages add substantial new knowledge to the comparative typological study of sign languages in terms of known typological diversity, as they exhibit many unusual structures never before documented, such as in the areas of spatial grammar and numeral systems.</p> <p>In addition to journal articles and other publications (see below under 3), a volume on village sign languages (Zeshan and de Vos 2012) was published in the Sign Language Typology Series as Vol. 4 (De Gruyter Mouton & Ishara Press). This is the largest comprehensive documentation of “village sign languages” and their unique sociolinguistic and cultural settings published to date, and covers both linguistic and anthropological aspects of these communities. The iSLanDS Institute has also been working with UNESCO and the Foundation for Endangered Languages to include endangered sign languages in UNESCO’s <i>Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger</i>, which so far has not included any sign languages. This work is in consultation with the World Federation of the Deaf and has put these endangered sign languages literally “on the map”.</p> <p>Most of this work has been funded by grants awarded to Zeshan as PI. The EuroBABEL consortium, with a total amount of over EUR 800,000 and universities in the US (Austin Texas), the Netherlands (Leiden), Israel (Haifa) and Germany (Cologne), included both linguists/sociolinguists and anthropologists, as the project was grounded in an interdisciplinary approach. The iSLanDS team also devoted particular attention to issues of research ethics for this particular kind of fieldwork setting. Many of the consortium members, as well as additional researchers who had been in contact with the team over the lifetime of the project, subsequently worked with iSLanDS on follow-up research to prepare data on endangered village sign languages for publication in the UNESCO <i>Atlas</i>. As no previous standard existed on how to measure and evaluate the degree of endangerment among sign languages, we initiated a separate research stream to develop a robust methodology, and an international committee with members from within and outside iSLanDS was formed in 2013 to develop this line of work further.</p> <p>The EuroBABEL (Better Analyses Based on Endangered Languages) team at UCLan included Panda and de Vos working in India and in Bali, as well as two more deaf fieldwork researchers (Dikyuva and Escobedo Delgado) working in Turkey and Mexico, as well as an MA by Research student (Lanesman) from Israel, who is also deaf. While EuroBABEL was explicitly theory-driven, the project did facilitate primary linguistic documentation, thereby legitimising the languages and</p>

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their user communities and contributing to greater awareness. Importantly, several smaller projects specifically for language documentation were running in parallel with EuroBABEL at iSLanDS. Thus we received several grants from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project for work on rural sign languages in India (PI Panda 2009/10 for £6,000), Bali (PI de Vos 2011/12 for £8,000), Turkey (PI Zeshan 2011-2013, £74,000), and Cameroon (PI Lutalo-Kiingi 2013-2015; for post-doctoral work upon leaving iSLanDS). This has allowed the concerned researchers to go into further depth regarding particular sub-topics, such as child language acquisition of a “village sign language” (project by de Vos).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- De Vos, C. (2012). *Sign-spatiality in Kata Kolok: How a village sign language in Bali inscribes its signing space*. MPI Series in Psycholinguistics Vol. 72. Nijmegen: Radboud University. – Book; available at <http://pubman.mpg.de/pubman/faces/viewItemFullPage.jsp?itemId=escidoc:1558143>
- Liszkowski, U., Brown, P., Callaghan, T., Takada, A., & De Vos, C. (2012). A prelinguistic gestural universal of human communication. *Cognitive Science*, 36, 698-713. – journal article; available at http://pubman.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:762562:16/component/escidoc:1466200/Liszkowski_Cognitive_Science_2012.pdf (doi:10.1111/j.1551-6709.2011.01228.x.)
- Dikyuva, H., C. E. Escobedo Delgado, S. Panda & U. Zeshan (2012): Working with village sign language communities: Deaf fieldwork researchers in professional dialogue. In Zeshan, U. & de Vos, C. (eds.): *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights*. Berlin a.o.: De Gruyter Mouton & Nijmegen: Ishara Press. 313-344. – Book chapter; REF output. The volume includes a further 3 chapters and 5 sociolinguistic sketches authored by iSLanDS members.
- Zeshan, U. (2010): Village sign languages – A commentary. In: Mathur, G. & D.J. Napoli (eds.): *Deaf around the world*. Oxford: OUP. – Book chapter; REF output.
- Zeshan, U., H. Dikyuva, C.E. Escobedo Delgado, S. Panda & C. de Vos (2013): Cardinal numerals in village sign languages – Approaching cross-modal typology. *Linguistic Typology* 17:3 – Journal; REF output.

Evidence of quality: This research has been disseminated through highly rated publishers (*Linguistic Typology* journal, Oxford University Press, De Gruyter Mouton book series). The PhD-level research by de Vos (2012) was co-supervised by Zeshan with colleagues at the prestigious Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, and this research has led to other important work such as an article in the *Cognitive Science* journal. Furthermore, the research was supported through an AHRC grant of £219,000 awarded to PI Prof. Ulrike Zeshan as part of a consortium project funded with over EUR 800,000 by the European Science Foundation’s flagship EUROCORES scheme.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Like spoken languages, sign languages can become endangered and extinct due to several factors such as language contact and lack of recognition. The endangerment of sign languages, previously largely ignored, has been brought to the forefront of attention through work at iSLanDS.

The EuroBABEL project “Endangered sign languages in village communities” (2008-2013) has led to engagement with international bodies at the highest levels. In June 2011, the project led to PI Zeshan being invited to join a meeting of experts on language endangerment hosted at UNESCO in Paris. The expert group had been working since 2003 and had produced the important *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* (in print and as a web database). However, no sign languages were represented, and most members of the expert group were not aware of sign languages also being endangered. After Zeshan gave a plenary presentation on sign language endangerment at UNESCO, it was decided to include sign languages in the online database and the next print edition with a dedicated chapter, to be authored by Zeshan. Consultancy on endangered sign

languages for UNESCO is channelled through the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL), and the first data sets have been submitted for inclusion in the online version of the *Atlas*. This activity has since expanded to include urban sign languages, some of which are becoming endangered too. Through the international committee coordinated by iSLanDS, an increasing number of concerned sign linguistics and deaf organisations have been in contact to provide data for inclusion in the *Atlas*. The committee ensures the academic rigour of these data and their classification into categories of increasing endangerment, as inclusion in this project under a UNESCO umbrella can be a very valuable campaigning and lobbying tool for concerned deaf communities.

This work proceeds in consultation with the World Federation of the Deaf, facilitated by the fact that several iSLanDS members serve on WFD expert committees. In November 2011, Zeshan and Dikyuva were invited to present at a conference on “Sign languages as endangered languages” hosted by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) in AI, Norway. Zeshan then worked with the sign linguistics expert group of the WFD, as well as with other colleagues in sign linguistics, to adapt the UNESCO questionnaire on language endangerment to the particular situation of sign languages. This questionnaire was used to gather data on endangered sign languages and to analyse them before preparing them for inclusion in the UNESCO *Atlas*.

In addition, iSLanDS has been using a range of channels to raise public awareness about the issue of sign language endangerment. This has included media engagement (e.g. article in the Boston Globe, interview with BBC Radio 4); a video display on sign language endangerment at the iSLanDS 5-year anniversary, which was organised for the general public; and organisation of an exhibition at the EuroBABEL final conference in Leiden, NL, which was attended by both academics and policy-makers. The iSLanDS team twice participated with a stall in the Endangered Languages Week, a public event organised at the School of Oriental and African Languages in London, and Zeshan gave a public lecture at one of these occasions.

It has also been important to publicise the value of these minority sign languages in those countries where iSLanDS members have been engaged in fieldwork. In the village of Alipur in South India, Panda organised several workshops for the local community, which led to the opening of a School for the Deaf, and the broadcast of Alipur signs on the local TV channel. In 2013, he visited the village with a documentary film maker, and the raw footage for a documentary film about the community, the deaf people in the village and their sign language, has been shot. Dikyuva and Zeshan held several internal workshops with the users of Mardin Sign Language (MarSL) in Turkey to raise their awareness about the value of their language, including plans for a MarSL website. In February 2013, they presented results of the MarSL project together with five elderly users of MarSL at Ankara University; this was the first time that the MarSL community members were instrumental in presenting their own language and culture to the public. Dikyuva also presented a session on MarSL to 70 deaf delegates at a national meeting of the Turkish National Deaf Federation. In the village of Chican on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, fieldwork researcher Escobedo Delgado consulted with the local community on practical outcomes from the EuroBABEL project, and as the community wished to produce a dictionary of Chican signs, he has been working with the Ishara Press in the Netherlands on a dictionary project.

In the village of Alipur in India, we were drawing on the experience of de Vos in Bali, where, prior to her post at iSLanDS, she had been instrumental in setting up a deaf classroom within the local primary school, in order to provide basic education to the village’s deaf children. Panda emulated this model and has worked with the community elders in Alipur, with the aim to provide schooling for deaf children in Alipur. The Unity School for the Deaf was established in 2010 with 17 deaf children, providing access to education for deaf children for the first time within Alipur. The village is now considering a different model, integrating the deaf children into a larger school by setting up a specialist deaf classroom. The acquisition of literacy by the deaf children has enabled significant benefits in their lives and this has filtered through to deaf adults too, who are now able to use SMS messaging. One of the deaf young men who has worked with Panda as a research assistant for several years is now looking for options for admission to university. This kind of local capacity building is at the heart of our approach to social impact of our research. We aim to work with deaf

academics from the target countries where we work so that they can take leading roles in local empowerment initiatives.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- Report in the Boston Globe on endangered village sign languages at <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/07/27/village-sign-languages-vanishing-fast/JKD8eE0LRHpbWW8YZsYPvO/story.html>
- UNESCO online *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>
- CONTACT 1: Mandana Seyfeddinipur, Director, Endangered Languages Documentation Programme of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project – this project requires both academic and community-related outputs as mandatory criteria for successful projects.
- CONTACT 2: Christopher Moseley, Treasurer, Foundation for Endangered Languages – the FEL works with UNESCO on the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger
- British Deaf News, April 2008 Issue, pp. 22-23: “Secret Signs – Conference offers glimpse of world's rarest sign languages” – this reports on the special session on village sign languages at the CLSLR3/SIGN3 conference at UCLan.