Language ideologies on the difference between gesture and sign

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates academic and everyday perspectives on the difference between gesture and sign. A large number of language scholars have suggested that gesture is not language, that different forms of gesturing and signing exist on continua, and/or that they could be classified on a developmental cline. "Everyday" ideologies of deaf people in Mumbai showed either an analytical collapse of gesture and sign or a distinction between them, and were more focused on hearing status and on contextual factors in deciding whether something counted as gesture or sign –as compared to academic ideologies which were more focused on form. In the context of language classes and research projects, academic ideologies bleed into, are resisted, adopted or transformed in everyday contexts.

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1. Introduction: squeezing the bee hive

On a Sunday afternoon in November 2015, we (the authors) organised a discussion on the difference between "gesture" and "sign" during one of the weekly gatherings of the Bombay Foundation of Deaf Women. The discussion was organised within a research project on gesture-based communication between deaf signers and hearing non-signers, led by the first author of this article. About fifty deaf women aged between 18 and 80 were present; most of them sat in cross-legged position on mats on the floor, and a small number of women sat in the back on the limited number of available chairs, all facing an elevated platform in the front of the room. The discussion was facilitated by Sujit, research assistant in the project and the second author of this article. Whomever wanted to comment or to ask questions and as such contribute to the public discussion, took the stage. At one point, prompted by Sujit, participants discussed whether iconic and pantomimic ways of explaining a concept should be called "gesturing" or "signing". One of the participants, Neeta,[1] a woman aged around fifty who works as a teacher assistant in a school for deaf children, acted out how she would explain the concept "honey" to a deaf child who does not yet know the Indian Sign Language (ISL) sign HONEY pictured in Fig. 1 (indicating licking the hand palm).

She demonstrated how she would use a sign signifying "bee" (Fig. 2a), picture the shape of a beehive (Fig. 2b), squeeze the bee hive to indicate that honey is extracted (Fig. 2c), the extracted honey drips out (Fig. 2d) and then is licked from the hand (Fig. 2e). Even though a bee hive is not actually squeezed in the actual process of extracting honey, the participants agreed that this way of explaining the concept "honey" would be understood by many non-signers.

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  [1] Personal names of participants in deaf club discussions are pseudonyms. Names of people who were featured in the project film (Ishaare) are real names.

This example was discussed at length by Sujit, Neeta, and Sarita; another woman aged around fifty. At that point, all three of them stood on the stage. The discussion focused on the cases of (1.) hearing non-signers, and (2.) young deaf children who are in the process of learning ISL. Sujit asked Neeta and Sarita whether they thought this "squeezing the beehive" example was gesture or sign. Sarita responded:

Sarita:	Those are gestures since the hearing can understand it. If deaf people only do the licking of the handpalm [ie, a conventional ISL sign HONEY, Fig. 1] will the hearing understand? They won't. It's different, so these are gestures, used for communication between the hearing and us. [..]
Sujit:	Neeta, as a teacher, what do you think? Is it gesture or sign language? […]
Neeta:	The children [in the deaf school] use sign language naturally. I can't say if it's gestures or sign language. It's their own way.
Sujit:	Yes, yes, it's their own way, yes. But what do you think, is that [the bee hive] gesture or sign language, or are you uncertain what to call it?
Neeta:	I don't know.
Sujit:	Is it gesture or sign, you don't know?
Neeta:	I can't say. It's natural. The children's own way. They copy from the older children around them. Friends talk among each other [and share/pass on signs]. The older children use sign language.
Sujit:	So if the older children sign, what's it what the younger ones do [i.e. the ones who are in the process of learning ISL]? Is it signing or gesture, or maybe you don't know what it is?
Neeta:	It is natural, natural. It's natural, their own. It's signing.
Sujit:	So it's signing?
Neeta:	It's signing.
Sujit:	It's not gesturing?
Neeta:	No.

Sarita thus identified the bee hive story as gesture because it would be understandable for hearing people who don't know ISL, and therefore maps this way of communicating onto hearing people. Subsequently, Sujit tried to lead Neeta towards classifying the bee hive example within a gesture-sign dichotomy too, but Neeta intuitively resisted the distinction. According to her, her pupils' way of communicating, even when it is not conventional ISL, is "natural", and later she specifies that it is "signing". She does initially not make a distinction between gesturing and signing, and maps signing onto deaf people, *irrespective* of whether it would be understood by hearing people or not. Sarita then said she thought Neeta did not know the concept of "gesture":

Sarita:	Ok, I think, she [Neeta] does not know the difference between sign language and gestures. She does not know. We have to explain. That's what I feel. [to Neeta:] Do you know what is sign language? What is sign language?
Neeta:	Sign language is deaf's own language.
Sarita:	And gestures?
Neeta:	The hearing use slow movement of hands, saying only few bits.
Sarita:	So squeezing the bee hive is sign language?
Neeta:	Yes it's sign language.
Sarita:	But we think it isn't!
Sujit:	No no no. It's her opinion. She is not wrong. It's what you [Sarita] think. She [Neeta] thinks it's not. Right right, ok.

Here, Neeta indicates a difference between deaf and hearing signing, acknowledging that hearing people sign slowly (and thus differently from deaf people); yet still without categorizing hearing people's signing as "gesture", as Sarita did. At a later point in the discussion, Sarita signed:

> I don't want to win this. I want that you all understand the difference between sign language and gestures. (…) Sign language is our own, it has been researched, it's related to our tradition, it's been linked to us for generations. That is sign language. Gestures are made by individuals, with imagination, to be able to communicate, to say something. (…) Gestures are based on impromptu thoughts, made up (…), created to make ourselves understood. Those are gestures. But language comes to us through generations.

Here, Sarita conforms to a widespread perspective within (sign) linguistics (see below) and also within Euro-American deaf communities. Indicated by Sujit's persistent questioning about the classification of the bee hive example as either signing or gesturing, this is a perspective which has inspired and influenced the research design as a whole. Sarita is well-travelled, has had exposure to different sign languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL) used by Indian deaf friends who live(d) in the USA for years, and British Sign Language (BSL) since her sister in law lives in the UK. Sarita's signing style was accented by both BSL and ASL, whereas Neeta signed non-accented ISL. Sarita's background and contacts probably have informed her perspective. In contrast to Sarita's opinion though, most deaf participants within the study, such as Neeta, did *not* intuitively distinguish gesturing and signing as separate concepts. Correspondingly, a widely used word in India to talk about both gestures and signs is the Hindi word "Ishaare" (which is the plural of "Ishara", a word that exists not only in Hindi but also in several other languages including Marathi and Urdu).

Given the nature of this discussion session and its use of prompts and terminology, this example vividly illustrates the nature of the research enterprise, by demonstrating academic-related "pressure" to ideologically align with either gesture or sign. In this example, widespread academic or western language ideologies (distinguishing gesture and sign) are introduced or circulated within the frame of a research project and either conform to, or differ from everyday language ideologies. In this article, *academic language ideologies* are defined as ideologies that guide scholarship. They inform and are informed by explicit