Signed Languages, Linguistic Rights and the Standardization of Geographical Names

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Abstract

Over the last forty years, there has been considerable international work on country names, their exonyms and their standardization. This work has been based on official written names. In contrast, this paper examines several issues relating to nonwritten country names within Deaf communities. First, the various systems used to form country names within signed languages are outlined. These can include "descriptive" semantic etymology based on behavioural traits of individuals from the countries, elements transferred from the spoken or written form of a name, via mouthing, finger spelling (using a manual alphabet), and loan translation of all or part of the name. Second, four issues in regard to country name signs are commented on, namely (a) the relationship between official languages and signed languages, (b) generational differences in the use of specific country names, (c) the influence of political correctness on country names, and (d) the work of the World Federation of the Deaf on country names, specifically the publication of Gestuno in 1975 and the consequential development of International Sign Pidgin. The final matter to be treated is exonyms and their standardization in signed rather than written languages.

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1. Introduction

The world's population can be divided into two groups, the Deaf and the hearing. Both Deaf and hearing language communities form and use geographical names, but in quite different ways: the one through signing, the other through speaking.

The proportion of people who are deaf form birth or early childhood is estimated at between one and four per thousand, while up to 14% of a population can become deaf during the lifespan. (Council of Europe 2003; Mitchell 2005). It is those who are born deaf, those who lose their hearing at a very young age and those who are the parents and caregivers of those who are born deaf who are most likely to use signed languages (SLs).

From the late 1940s, there have been many developments in the field of human rights. The trend has been to identify groups and categories of people that could have rights and to legislate rights for those identified groups and categories. Only recently have Deaf communities been identified as one such entity to whom certain rights are to be extended.

Over the last forty or so years there has been considerable international work on the standardization of geographical names. For example, the UN has its own working group on the subject and most countries have national geographical names authorities involved with the standardization of their own geographical names. The standardization that has occurred within SLs themselves seems to have been overlooked by the other standardization work which seems to be based solely on the official written forms of spoken languages.

In this paper two issues are addressed:

(1) The extent to which Deaf people and their SLs are recognized and accepted in the policies and laws of various international, regional and national polities; and

(2) The extent to which SLs are included in international, regional and national work on the standardization of geographical names.

2. Signed Languages

Natural signed languages (SLs) have arisen spontaneously through continuous interaction among Deaf communities who use signs as a primary means of communication. For Deaf people, using a visual-gestural modality for human language is a natural alternative to the aural-spoken modality. Research has shown that SLs are not, as previously thought, ad hoc collections of gestures, and are not universal. They have all the characteristics of natural languages with their own vocabulary and grammatical structures that can be described at the levels of phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Stokoe 1978; Fischer and Siple 1990). As in spoken languages, regional, ethnic and social variation occurs in SLs, and they change through natural usage and transmission between generations over historical time (Lucas et al. 2001). In short, SLs are languages in their own right.

There is great diversity of SLs around the world: Ethnologue (2005) lists 121 national SLs from all continents and regions of the world, though Harrington (2006a and 2006b) suggests there might be more. However, as with spoken languages there is often political dispute or empirical uncertainty as to whether what is claimed as a distinct SL is a language, a dialect, or merely a variant within a SL.

SLs that evolve within Deaf communities are different from artificial or contrived 'sign systems' that manually represent the words and grammar of spoken language, such as 'Australasian Signed English' or 'Signing Exact English' (Ramsey 1989; Stewart 1993). Primary Deaf SLs are also distinct from 'alternate' or 'secondary' sign systems developed and used by certain groups of hearing people for various special purposes when speaking is not possible or not permitted, e.g., for religious or ceremonial purposes in certain cultures or in noisy workplaces, such as mills (Davis 2007).

While all SLs exist in contact with a surrounding spoken language, they are not derivatives of those languages. Thus British Sign Language is not a gestural code for British English but is a separate language with its own lexicon, morphology and syntax. SLs in different countries have historical relationships that do not always correspond to those of spoken languages. For instance, British and Australian Sign Languages are related to each other, but unrelated to American Sign Language, even though hearing people in those countries share a common spoken language (McKee and Kennedy 2000).

A key difference between SLs and spoken languages is in their modes of use. A spoken language can be used in four modes - speaking, listening, reading and writing while a SL is used only in 'speaking and listening' modes (using the visual channel), and not reading and writing. SL use is now also mediated by digital technologies that capture and relay video images. Literacy for Deaf people is usually in the written language of their hearing neighbours, and literate Deaf people are necessarily bilingual to various degrees.

3. Signed Languages and Geographical Names

Within their lexicons, SLs have established ways of referring to geographical locations such as cities, regions and countries. The set of conventional signs for geographical names within a SL may not be equivalent in number to those used in the spoken language of the area. This is because place name signs tend to become established only for the places that Deaf people commonly need to refer to; low-frequency names that don't commonly enter Deaf discourse in a given locale are less likely to have an established sign. Such locations may be referred to by different means (see below).

As in spoken languages, geographical names differ between SLs; i.e., country names are not internationally standardized. For example 'England' is expressed differently in American, French and New Zealand Sign Languages (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Signs for 'England'


American Sign Language   French Sign Language   New Zealand Sign Language

SLs change naturally through time. Country names, in particular, show evidence of intergenerational change. Changing cultural sensibilities and perhaps increased international contact have led to the replacement of some earlier country signs by more 'neutral' or indigenous signs, especially for country names that were originally based on a stereotypical and potentially pejorative characteristic, e.g., 'slanted-eye' in names for Asian countries and people (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. From 'slanted eyes' to 'Mao jacket' for China**
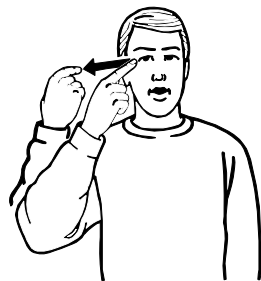
The changed sign in many western signed languages

Available lexical sources enable us to identify several common types of structure in country names (e.g., McKee and McKee 2000; S. Supalla 1990; Yau and He 1987).

Most prevalent across SLs are country names based on *visual iconicity* of some kind. Such signs represent a characteristic visible feature of the people, clothing, distinctive actions, topography or icon associated with a place or country (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Visually motivated country name signs (in wide international use)

Germany (spiked helmet)	Japan (shape of islands)	London (noisy)
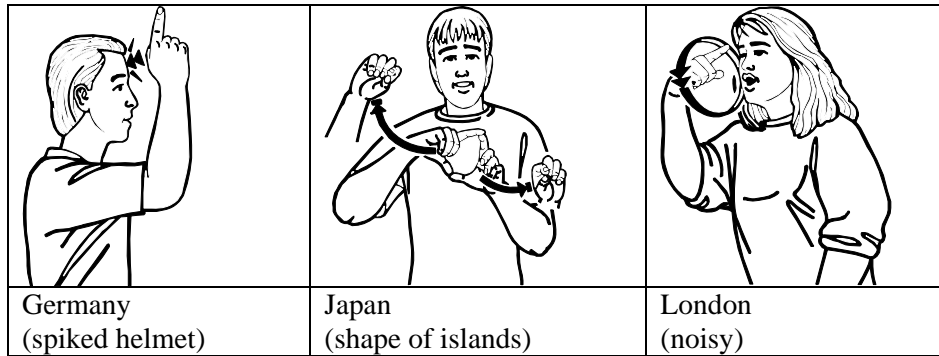
Metonymy is a device used in the formation of some place name signs; for example, a sign representing 'a crown' or 'centre' occurs as the sign for the capital cities in some SLs (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Metonymy – signs denoting the capital city

A crown denoting Copenhagen/Stockholm Danish/Swedish Sign Languages	Paris (Centre) French Sign Language	Buenos Aires (Centre) Argentinean Sign Language

Alternatively, geographical name signs may borrow elements of spoken language forms in the following ways:

(a) *Pointing and mouthing*. For example, indicating the 'compass' direction of the place, accompanied by mouthing of its name (see Figure 5).

(b) *Fingerspelling* uses a manual representation of an alphabet. There are many manual alphabets but in all the geographic name may be spelled out in full or, as in Figure 6, may be abbreviated in some way.

Figure 5. Pointing and Mouthing   **Figure 6. Fingerspelling**
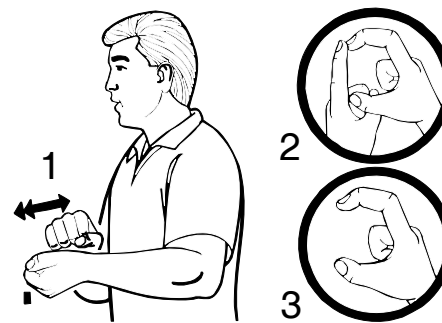
Auckland
(New Zealand Sign Language)
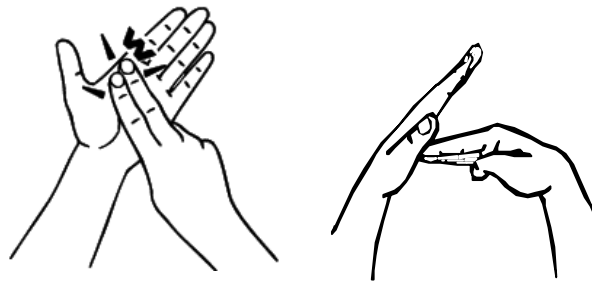
N + Z (New Zealand in New Zealand Sign
Language)

(c) Calques. In these the sign name 'translates' morphemes of the spoken/written name (not always in a conceptually equivalent manner) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Calques

'hungry' for Hungary
(New Zealand Sign Language)

'wash' + fingerspelling 'D and C' for
Washington, DC
(New Zealand Sign Language)

There is no limit on the capacity of SLs to develop signs for geographical entities. Within each SL community, there may be differences between preferred ways of naming local/internal entities (e.g., cities, states), as opposed to country names; for example, fingerspelling and mouthing of spoken names feature more frequently in local name signs than in country name signs.

4. Signed Languages and Human Linguistic Rights

Deaf communities have had to struggle for many decades to get recognition by governments and hearing people of the role of their SLs in the identity and lives of Deaf people. The year 1880 had a seminal impact on the status of SLs around the world. In this year the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf was held in Milan, Italy (Anonymous 2008). A central aim of the congress was to ban the use of SLs in schools and to promote the oralist method of education, which uses speaking and lip- or speech-reading.

The first congress recommendation set the scene, passing the following resolution:

The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of articulation over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language, declares that the oral method should be preferred to that of signs in education and the instruction of deaf-mutes (cited in Berke 2007).

A later assessment of the consequences of the congress is that "No other event in the history of deaf education had a greater impact on the lives and education of deaf people. This single event almost destroyed signed language" (Berke 2007).

For a century the oral method became the dominant approach in many if not most countries that educated the Deaf. However, for at least the last thirty years there has been increased national and international pressure for recognition of SLs as the preferred means of communication by Deaf people. These efforts have been concentrated in national Deaf Associations and their international policy forum, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). WFD has advocated for signed language recognition at the level of the EU and the UN (Timmermans 2003).

There have been various international agreements about protecting the rights of minorities. Many have argued that the members of Deaf communities should be regarded as minorities and hence SLs should be recognized and treated as minority languages (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas 1994). To support this view, appeal has been made to the many international documents that imply or mention minorities. For example, the:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

Typical of the intent of such documents is Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

The call for the end of discrimination on the basis of the person's language came in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It takes the same thrust as the above documents but, for the first time in international documents, introduces the concept of 'linguistic minority' and calls, in Article 30, for "the right, in community with other members of his or her group, [for a person] to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language."

The Declaration on the Rights of the Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1992) extended the notion of linguistic human rights. Thus: "Article 2: [states]…persons belonging to… linguistic minorities have the right (2.1) … to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination" and "Article 4 [states] persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue."

Possibly the first recognition of SLs as SLs, i.e., without the notion "minority", is the regional European Union Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. In 2003, they called for the recognition of SLs by the member states as a natural and complete means of communication for Deaf people so as to promote the integration of Deaf people into society and to facilitate their access to education, employment and justice.

The recent Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is "the first document on an international level mentioning Signed Language users and the Deaf" (Jokinen n.d.). It came into effect on 12 May 2008 and by the end of July 2008 had been ratified by 32 countries.

In Article 2 of the convention, the term "language" includes spoken and SLs and in subsequent articles it states that states shall accept and facilitate the use of SLs, shall recognize and promote the use of SLs and shall facilitate the learning of signed language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the Deaf community.

At the international and regional levels, movement can be seen from statements about general rights in the early post World War II declarations, charters, covenants, conventions, etc., to general language rights, to minorities and minority language rights with the possible inclusion of SLs, and, very recently, to specific agreements about the rights of Deaf people and their SLs. However, in spite of all agreements it is up to each state to legislate for those rights and uneven progress has been made both in response to the international and regional documents and to other pressures in taking account of Deaf people's rights to the use of their SLs, e.g., protection through constitutions, education, the courts and other spheres.

The failure to provide in all countries the full range of human rights, including linguistic human rights, for signed language users, indicates either ignorance on the part of policy makers about international, regional and national agreements to cater for the needs of Deaf communities in the laws of each country; or the agreements and needs are known but have been overlooked; or the agreements and needs are known but have been ignored.

5. Signed Languages and the Standardization of Geographical Names

There are many types of geographical names for the world's natural and cultural features. Many of these features often have more than one name, the names have variant spelling, the scripts used for some names are inaccessible to those who use other scripts, and local names may be different to the more widely recognized international names. In addition, there is often some competition within a polity and between polities about what to call those features that extend across polity boundaries. Consequently there have been both international and national attempts to standardize many geographical names.

The first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (hereafter the Conference) was held in Geneva in 1967 and up to and including 2007, nine such conferences have been held (Natural Resources Canada 2007). At the 1967 Conference an Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Geographical Names was formed and, at the London conference five years later, the ad hoc group became a permanent body under the Economic and Social Council. This group, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (hereafter UNGEGN) acts as an advisory body with the task of promoting work with geographical names, both within member states and other organizations and within the UN itself. UNGEGN has held twenty four meetings so far and makes submissions to the Conference. The resultant resolutions are nonbinding on the member states but have a considerable impact on their geographical names work.

For spoken languages standardization means that in a specific state there should be only one name for each one of its features, or indeed for the name of the state, rather than two or more. The situation where there are two or more names is generally regarded as undesirable. Consequently wherever possible the necessary political compromises about spoken languages' names need to be made at the national level. Ideally the principle of univocity should apply (Kerfoot 2003: 40). The UNGEGN and the Conference have favoured this standardization approach because in their view for communication to be unambiguous there should be little or no variation in the spelling of geographical names (UNGEGN 2001).

Examination of the resolutions passed by the Conference show that the Conference has passed several resolutions on minority languages (Natural Resources Canada 2007) and in several resolutions has called for greater recognition of the minority language names and their inclusion in a country's maps. However, their concern for standardization is confined to spoken languages and to date Deaf communities and their SLs have not been considered.

For SLs standardization at the national level is a little more complicated. Many countries appear to have only one SL (e.g., Rwanda has only French SL), but because of historical factors many countries have two or more SLs. For example, Canada has American, Québéc, Inuit, and

Nova Scotian or Maritime SLs while Togo has American and French SLs and Thailand has Thai, Chiangmai, Tak, Ban Khor and Hill Country SLs (which may be regarded as five different SLs or as varieties).

Branson and Miller (2008) state that "the promotion and indeed the development of national SLs, as distinct from more localized community SLs, is associated with four basic movements: the development of national associations of Deaf people; the drive for the achievement of linguistic rights as an aspect of human rights; the development of formal language policies; and the drive for national education systems with sign language as the medium of instruction." Further, as linguistic descriptions of SLs became available from the 1970s onwards some widespread Deaf SLs have become widely recognized as national SLs, e.g., American SL, British SL and Auslan (Australian SL).

Once nationally standardized geographical names are developed by a national names organization they then become the internationally standardized names for all the names within a country and the country's name itself (Kerfoot 2003: 40). The UNGEGN is developing a data base which will include all standardized country names, together with the standardized names of every large city, i.e., every city that has 100,000 or more inhabitants (UNGEGN n.d.). The result is a form of international standardization to which persons who can read one of the six UN official languages can have direct access.

Similarly, SLs have an international dimension. Over the last 40 years, international contact between Deaf people and their languages has increased, partly through the activities of Deaf organizations such as the WFD and the Deaf Olympics organizing body (CISS). An increase in recreational travel, migration, international aid projects, and the use of electronic media that allows remote language transmission via video, films, and mobile telephones with cameras have all contributed to the higher level of contact between signers within their own country and with those in other countries. Such developments have led to the need for standardized geographical names at the international level.

WFD has made attempts to develop a unified lexicon, International Sign (IS), for formal international communication. For example, the WFD developed a lexicon called 'Gestuno' in the 1970s (The British Deaf Association 1975). Amongst the many entries in this publication are signs for the generic parts of geographical names, e.g., city, port, hill and island, and signs for fifty-three countries and for six regions such as Asia, Oceania and South America. In 2003, WDF published an updated country name list. This contains signs for 155 polities such as Austria, Macau, Vojvodina and Zambia along with two names for larger areas, i.e., the EU and Scandinavia. In 2007, WFD published "A handbook on International Sign". Amongst other signs are 152 signs for polities, e.g., Bangladesh, Faroe Islands, Malawi and Vatican City, and six signs for larger entities, e.g., Central America and the Pacific. IS is not a universal or conventional language; rather, it is a recognizable mode of interlanguage communication that many Deaf people can use effectively due to the high degree of visual iconicity and common grammatical structures in SLs that arise from the visual-spatial modality (Quinto-Pozos 2007). Attempts at standardization have focused only on lexical items relevant to international contact.

"The use of International Sign is a crucial part of the international Deaf community" (Jokinen 2007: 9), and while it has influenced the vocabulary used in formal contexts (such as meetings), it has not yet replaced the language that is improvised between Deaf people across language boundaries (Moody 1994). The IS names are not intended to replace local usage within national SLs. Nevertheless, the currency of these signs in international situations is having some flow-on effect to usage of country names in national SLs. This is an organic rather than imposed process, occurring because Deaf delegates and SL interpreters return to their countries with the international or indigenous name sign for a country or city and use it locally. As SLs become

more accessible to an international audience, this increases the relevance of standardized national and international geographical names for Deaf communities.

6. Conclusion

Overall, two processes are underway: the national, regional and international standardization of geographical names in both spoken and SLs, and recent actions that recognize and promote the rights of Deaf people to acquire and use SLs in all contexts.

Deaf SLs are natural languages that develop in the same way as the languages of hearing people. They are as capable as spoken languages of developing words for everything. In regard to geographical names, Deaf communities develop signs for them as needed in the same way as do spoken language communities develop needed words.

However, there is a significant difference between SLs and spoken languages and that is the extent to which SLs are recognized and accepted as languages to which the users, Deaf people, have the same linguistic rights as hearing people have to their own spoken languages. Efforts have been made to have SLs included within the minority language framework of international agreements but such efforts have had limited success. Recent developments have been to try to deal with SLs not as a subset of minority languages but in their own right as separate languages. The position, though, is that in practice SLs do not have the same level of recognition, acceptance and protection in states' legislation that spoken languages do.

Within spoken languages there has been considerable work done at national levels on the standardization of geographical names. This work has often involved the UNGEGN. In contrast, within each national SL, the development of city and country names has been largely an internal evolutionary process.

In regard to the international standardization of the names of large cities and countries in spoken languages, the UNGEGN is developing a database which will contain the names that have been agreed upon by the national names authorities. This work is based on the written and spoken forms of the names. Each such city and country name will be presented in each of the six official languages of the UN.

For SLs at the international level the "WFD variety of International Sign has already stabilized… into a lingua franca" (Supalla, Ted 2007:16), with the consequence that some of its large city and country names (which may have originated in national SLs) are being used within national Deaf communities. That is, in SLs worldwide the signs for geographical names may be gradually merging at the national and international levels.

However, when communication is between those who use SLs and those who use spoken languages in non face-to-face visual communication (such as international broadcasting, or meetings) misunderstandings can arise from the failure to use common communication systems. The need to ensure that this does not happen arises, for example, because:

- of the need for inclusiveness for effective communication;
- of the continuing rapid increase in international communication across both signed and spoken languages;
- of the many contexts in which information is available in visual digital form; and
- of the increasing participation of Deaf people in the international arena, e.g., in regional and international policy and cooperation concerning disability, language, education and sport

Thus as signed and spoken languages become more accessible to international audiences the need for standardized geographical names in both modes increases.

At present, it seems that, at least publicly, those concerned with the standardization of geographical names in both national and international SLs and spoken languages have not yet

come together to discuss common concerns. UNGEGN and international Deaf organizations offer models of effective cooperation within their limited spheres for strengthening national and international communication; as such, they all have potentially valuable perspectives to bring to wider efforts on this front. What we would advocate is that the UNGEGN involves WFD (as the international representative of Deaf people) and national SL organizations in its consultation and projects, and that it acknowledges and supports WFD efforts to promote a set of internationally standardised geographical name signs for countries, large cities and polities. Agreement upon and promotion of these should be actioned through existing Deaf political networks and communication technologies. Other groups that could be consulted in such a process are signed language linguists, and the recently formed World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), which has a formal relationship with WFD.

Our suggestions presuppose that the communities of both Deaf and hearing people see a need for a mechanism to standardize geographical names across all languages within their polities. Such a need cannot be assumed but is worthy of discussion and appropriate research by the relevant groups.

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