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Natural and elicited: Sign language corpus linguistics and linguistic ethnography as complementary methodologies

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Many domains of sociolinguistic enquiry have contributed to the development of our understanding of the sociolinguistics of sign languages, ranging from studies in language attitudes and multilingualism to discourse analysis and sociolinguistic variation (see, e.g. Lucas, 2001; Schembri & Lucas, 2015). Researchers have used a range of methodological approaches (see Kusters & Lucas, 2021 for an overview). Two complementary approaches for investigating the sociolinguistics of sign languages are corpus linguistics (CL) and linguistic ethnography (LE). CL and LE have been shaped by related branches of sociolinguistics: the former by studies in linguistic variation and the latter by interactional linguistics (Rampton, 2020). Both approaches respect the complexity of language variation and the sociolinguistic reality of sign languages existing within ambient majority and spoken language ecologies; both emphasize the necessity of strong researcher and community relationships; and both involve analysis of natural and elicited data. Crucially, both also reject traditional linguistic methods as a starting point for claims about language use, especially tightly controlled grammaticality judgements that are elicited from very few people on the basis of problematic 'native user' competencies (see Johnston et al., 2007; Sampson, 2007). As such, both may play a role in illuminating marginalized aspects of language use and communication (see Dingemanse, 2017).

In their own way, CL and LE each facilitate consideration of bigger questions such as why languages differ, how languages emerge and are acquired, and how various communication practices are used in different social ecologies. However, sign language CL and LE have distinct epistemic and methodological identities, including different perspectives on what kind of data is valuable and preferred toolkits for exploring aspects of sign language use. CL has approached these questions by investigating larger, national sign languages, whereas LE has focused on micro-contexts, often within much smaller signing communities. CL capitalizes on advances in digital technology that support widespread documentation and systematic investigation of sign language variation (Johnston, 2008a, 2010; Schembri & Johnston, 2013; see also Fenlon & Hochgesang, 2022). LE brings together linguistic analyses and ethnography to study situated language use (Hou & Kusters, 2020; Kusters & Hou, 2020). Yet there is more that unites these two approaches than divides, and the strengths of one may alleviate the weaknesses of the other. Greater merging between sign language CL and LE offers exciting potentialities for both researchers and communities.

Before going further, we first introduce ourselves. Gabrielle Hodge is a deaf, white, non-Indigenous researcher from Australia who uses corpus methods to analyse and describe patterns of sign language variation and use. Sara Goico is a hearing, white, Latina researcher from the United States who uses linguistic ethnography methods to analyse and describe the communicative practices of signers within situated contexts. Both are strong signers of various sign languages and members of their local deaf communities. Neither had met before this opportunity but share an appreciation for multidisciplinary research approaches and methodologies, and the need to centre historically marginalized people and practices. The starting point for our dialogue about CL and LE was an invitation to consider what is meant by 'natural' and 'elicited' data. However, we quickly realized there is confusion about these concepts from both CL and LE perspectives. It was necessary for us to first explain the history and motivations of each approach to the other.

2 | WHAT IS CORPUS LINGUISTICS?

Corpus linguistics is a method for systematically investigating patterns of language variation and use across large samples of language users. This is done by documenting, archiving and creating machine-readable data that is somehow representative of specific language users (Biber et al., 1999; Gries, 2009; McEnery & Wilson, 2001). Corpus methodologies allow us to differentiate what is shared across social networks from what is specific to individuals within these networks by analysing corpus data. Corpus data may be analysed using a range of theoretical frameworks depending on individual researcher preferences (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). CL methods are often used by researchers in documentary linguistics, language typology, sociolinguistics and computational linguistics.

CL is particularly useful and necessary for the documentation and description of sign languages, which are characterized by extensive variation. This variation mostly results from the entrenched systemic barriers to education and sign language acquisition often experienced by deaf people, and low rates of intergenerational sign language transmission (Johnston, 2004). The language learning trajectories of deaf signers within a community can vary wildly, and most signers learn sign languages via non-traditional language learning pathways (De Meulder, 2018; Snoddon, 2017). CL methods therefore support empirical investigations of language use, variation and change that are not possible (or advisable) from analysing data from one or two people.

The first sign language corpus was developed to document Auslan, a sign language of Australia. This involved filming, archiving and annotating a set of naturalistic, controlled and elicited sign language samples from 100 deaf heritage and early childhood signers (i.e. deaf signers who learned Auslan from their parents or from deaf peers before age 7) across Australia[1]. The Auslan Corpus[2] was curated

by Trevor Johnston, an Australian hearing researcher from a multigenerational deaf family (Johnston, 2008b). It was developed alongside the digitization of the first Auslan Dictionary (Johnston, 1989) into the online Auslan Signbank[3] (Johnston & Cassidy, 2008). Supported by prominent deaf community leaders, Johnston's efforts were vital to getting Auslan recognized as the language of the Australian deaf community (see Lo Bianco, 1987).

These resources have since supported growing awareness of Auslan in Australia, and the empirical description of Auslan as used by deaf signers who have experienced relatively uninterrupted, cross-generational language transmission (see Green et al., accepted, for an overview). Such description is vital for a range of minority language contexts suffering from a dearth of sign language resources, including deaf education, interpreter training and language teaching (Johnston, 2003, 2004). CL infrastructure such as online archives, metadata, annotation software and annotation guidelines detailing how the data are annotated also facilitate enriching, checking, sharing and citing of data (Crasborn & Sloetjes, 2008; Johnston, 2010, 2019). This supports open science principles and enables in-depth analysis of corpus data by different researchers over time (see also Berez-Kroeker, et al., 2018; Hodge & Crasborn, 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2016).

The Auslan Corpus was pioneering in many ways and served as a template for many other sign language corpora henceforth developed, including the BSL (British Sign Language) Corpus,[4] Corpus NGT (Sign Language of The Netherlands),[5] DGS (German Sign Language) Korpus[6] and Korpus PJM[7] (see Fenlon & Hochgesang, 2022). While the design of individual corpora may differ, their development is often closely tied to the political recognition of national sign languages and the demand for resources to support language maintenance and access for deaf signing peoples. Deaf community members are typically involved in the documentation, annotation and analysis of corpus data. The documentation and description of sign language corpora also support the preservation of heritage materials for future generations of deaf communities, including sign languages that are minority languages within a minority, such as Australian Irish Sign Language[8] (Adam, 2017) and Black American Sign Language[9] (McCaskill et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2015). The availability of sign language corpora for linguistic research also helps to mitigate individual and community research fatigue, which is a major issue in sign language research in general.

However, it is never the case that a sign language corpus is representative of entire signing communities. For example, most signers included in the Auslan Corpus are non-Indigenous white deaf Australians, because cultural and/or ethnic background was not used as a sampling variable. While some signers in the Auslan Corpus are Indigenous Australians, or from different migrant family backgrounds, this aspect of their sociality was not central to their involvement in Auslan Corpus documentation. Signers who learned Auslan later in life were also not included, despite representing most of the signing community; neither were deaf migrants or refugees who recently arrived in the country. A corpus can rarely if ever, claim to be entirely balanced and representative: it can only be described in terms of *how* it is balanced and representative (Gries, 2009).

3 | WHAT IS LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY?

Linguistic ethnography is an umbrella term for an interdisciplinary community of scholars bringing together linguistic and ethnographic methodologies in the study of language use in social life (Creese, 2008; Tusting, 2020). As of yet, LE does not constitute a defined field or approach; researchers within LE come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and adopt a variety of methodologies in conducting LE research. LE is particularly useful for capturing the ephemeral nature of language practices in a granular manner. Ethnographic analysis allows researchers to 'open up' the complexities of the

everyday communicative lives of particular individuals and 'tie down' those ethnographic insights with detailed linguistic analyses of communicative practice (Rampton, et al., 2004).

In recent years, there has been a rapid growth of sign language research that seeks to examine sign language use in socially situated contexts. LE provides a new platform to examine the diversity of language practices within the global deaf population and to challenge essentialist categorizations of deaf populations and their signing practices (Kusters & Hou, 2020). It also enables the expansion and greater nuance of key concepts in sign language linguistics (Hou & Kusters, 2020). For example, researchers studying emerging sign languages have tended to assume a developmental cline: homesign > family homesign > village sign language > national sign language (e.g. Meir, et al., 2010; Zeshan & de Vos, 2012). By reorienting the researcher lens to the interactional and social processes of language acquisition and emergence, an LE approach problematizes this discrete categorization system as well as the notion of a cline from less to more language-like (see, e.g. Kisch, 2008; Hou, 2016; Horton, 2020; Hou & de Vos, 2021).

Detailed analyses of local signing practices have also expanded perspectives on the languaging and translanguaging of deaf individuals. LE studies shed light on the multilingual semiotic repertoires of deaf individuals who often utilize multiple linguistic varieties (both signed and spoken) across a variety of modes (e.g. Tapio, 2013). In addition, looking beyond just linguistic varieties, there has been a shift to study the larger semiotic repertoires of deaf individuals situated within particular environmental surrounds (e.g. Green, 2017; Kusters, et al., 2017). Moreover, the ethnographic component within LE research can be used to draw attention to aspects of the social ecologies in which deaf individuals live, such as existing language ideologies, that impact their communicative practices and everyday lives (see, e.g. Goico, 2019a; Kisch, 2012; Kusters, et al., 2020; Moges, 2015; Moriarty-Harrelson, 2017; Moriarty, 2020a).

Much of LE research is designed through and with community engagement, with deep consideration of the impact of different researchers and research agendas on the community under study (see Braithwaite, 2020). LE researchers have used action-based and participatory methods that actively involve members of the community in the production of the data (e.g. Holmström & Schönström, 2018; Weber & Snoddon, 2020). Others work in research teams, documenting how they navigate their relationships and addressing the impact of their research role through reflexive engagement (e.g. Cooper & Nguyễn, 2015; Hou, 2017). Research efforts are often designed with the goal of producing resources for the community, such as language curricula (e.g. Snoddon, 2018), language planning documents (e.g. Swanwick, et al., 2014), and deaf education programs (e.g. Goico, et al., 2021). Finally, researchers prioritize sharing research with public audiences, such as by producing ethnographic films (e.g. Kusters, et al., 2016; Moriarty, 2020b; Wolfram et al., 2020).

4 | WHAT DATA COLLECTION METHODS ARE USED IN CORPUS LINGUISTICS AND LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY?

The development of sign language corpora typically involves asking a specific sample of signers to undertake a range of communication-oriented activities within a controlled, indoor filmed context (see Hanke & Fenlon, 2022, for an overview). These activities are guided by deaf fieldworkers from the same community at a local deaf association or other meeting place, using a range of equipment including multiple cameras, tripods and backdrop screens. Hearing researchers are not usually present, to avoid influencing signers' communication. It is well-known that signers are very sensitive to researchers' audiological status and other factors such as ethnicity and will change their communication practices depending on who is present (see, e.g. Lucas & Valli, 1992). Decisions about who and what activities to film have generally been influenced by sampling methods used in ear-

lier sociolinguistics studies (e.g. Lucas et al., 2001). For example, inviting signers who are usually known to each other as relatives, friends or acquaintances; and pairing them according to age group, region, gender and age of sign language acquisition. However, corpus design can also be influenced by local intuitions about sign language variation, as well as specific research interests (see Hanke & Fenlon, 2022).

The range of corpus activities filmed generally includes conversations, narratives, guided discussions and interviews on important topics such as deafness eugenics and language attitudes, and elicitation tasks targeting specific lexical or grammatical forms, such as regional and/or school signs for colours and numbers (see Hanke & Fenlon, 2022). The exact composition of corpus activities is usually influenced by what is available for other existing corpora (e.g. to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison), the research interests of the research team (e.g. lexical variation, sociolinguistic variation) and the constraints of project duration and funding (e.g. 5 years vs. 10 years). The most valuable data results from open-ended conversation and guided discussion activities. Although they are pre-arranged, these most closely reflect the everyday language practices and attitudes of the participating signers filmed in a corpus documentation context. Yet data from narrative retellings and other elicitation tasks are useful for investigating specific research questions while also enabling more content-controlled comparisons across signers. Early corpus studies have tended to prioritize differentiating patterns of use across groups of signers and language activities, rather than detailed analyses of the potentially unique communication practices of individuals.

Research within LE couples linguistic analyses with ethnography, connecting micro-level language practices to the macro-level social and institutional contexts in which those language practices emerge (Creese, 2008). LE researchers use a variety of ethnographic methods and sources of data, such as participant observation, interviews, fieldnotes and the collection of documents such as policy documents and local flyers (see Kusters & Hou, 2020; Shaw, et al., 2015). A number of LE scholars have undertaken extended fieldwork with signing communities, learning as well as conducting their research in the languages of these communities. Video recording is fundamental for capturing language data. Some researchers use linguistic elicitation tasks including picture or video elicitations (e.g. Safar, 2019), occasionally even studying the interactional practices that occur between tasks rather than the elicited utterances themselves (e.g. Haviland, 2015). Nevertheless, many have sought to capture naturally occurring interactions that are unprompted by the researcher (e.g. Green, 2014; Goico, 2020; Kusters, 2017a, , Kusters, 2017b). This involves using camcorders to record deaf individuals as they go about their daily lives at home, in schools, marketplaces and other contexts.

The interest in studying naturally occurring interactions between deaf-deaf and deaf-hearing interlocutors emerged early in sign language research. It was particularly popular in studies of young deaf children's interaction in school settings and with deaf children and their mothers. Some of the sociolinguistic traditions represented in this research include interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. Metzger, 1995) and ethnography of communication (e.g. Johnson & Erting, 1989; Ramsey, 1997). Research on 'chaining' (Humphries & MacDougall, 2000) by European scholars within education, communication and literacy studies has been a particularly productive site for investigating multimodality and multilingualism in naturally occurring interactions (e.g. Bagga-Gupta, 2000; Tapio, 2019).

However, recording of naturally occurring interactions presents researchers with challenges that are unique to conducting research in local contexts. This includes privacy concerns about who, where and what can or cannot be captured on camera. Researchers must also accurately capture the embodied communication of signers, as well as the social ecology and environmental context in which the interaction unfolds (Kusters, et al., 2016; Moriarty, 2020b). This requires technical expertise relating to camera angles, shot frames and mobility with camcorders, as well as interpersonal sensitivity for different signers and their relationships.

It is worth noting that the concept of informed consent—if and how it can be given—is an ongoing issue for sign language researchers who collect video data, as is the case in both CL and LE, because the ways we use and share video data online are continuously changing. It may be the case, for example, that corpus participants who consented to their video recordings in 2008 being used in various academic and community contexts, may no longer feel comfortable with their data being used in, for example, widely shared sign vlogs that disseminate corpus or ethnographic findings, given how much online cultures and practices have evolved. Instead, it may be best to view informed consent as a 'process that must be renegotiated throughout, not just a form signed in the beginning of the research process' (De Meulder, 2019).

5 | WHAT IS 'NATURAL' AND 'ELICITED' DATA?

As we have established, researchers in both CL and LE collect and analyse various types of data. Furthermore, neither relies strictly on either 'elicited' or 'natural' data, such as in the case of researchers using the Conversation Analysis framework, which explicitly focuses on 'naturally occurring' interactions (e.g. Mondada, 2013). Within Conversation Analysis, it is generally recommended to minimize the presence of the researcher in order to maximize the naturalness of the setting (see, e.g. ten Have, 2007). Yet, even within Conversation Analysis, there is extensive debate on what constitutes 'natural' data (e.g. Potter, 2002). Researchers often take heavily value-laden stances on these terms. For example, the use of 'researcher elicited' data are presented as controlling for variables, while 'naturally occurring' data are presented as qualitatively better due to the lack of researcher involvement (Speer, 2002). Yet none of these methods meet Potter's (1996) criteria for 'natural' data: that the interaction would have unfolded in exactly the same manner, even if the researcher had never been born.

The use of the sociolinguistic lens draws attention to the Observer's Paradox: the fact that no method is a neutral form of investigation, nor can it be devoid of researcher involvement (Labov, 1972). All research takes place within socially situated interactions that include the involvement of the researcher to some extent. This may take the form of bringing individuals to a studio, staging who or what objects are present in the interactions, eliciting certain types of utterances and introducing oneself and recording equipment into the social ecology. Indeed, arguing about 'natural' and 'elicited' data is a bit like arguing about whether only 'native' speakers should be informing language description, or if there is a role for 'non-native' speakers too (see Ameka, 2006). Instead, there are always pros and cons; each will reveal different aspects of language use. Different approaches can make use of both kinds of data in various ways.

It is more important to acknowledge the positionality of individual researchers and attend to the impact of the research enterprise on the interactions that one is researching (Lucas & Valli, 1992; see also Polanyi, 1974, who argues that articulating one's personal knowledge is vital for all scientific endeavours). The stance that either 'natural' or 'elicited' data is more valuable is not helpful to furthering our understanding of sign language sociolinguistics, nor for developing new research practices and knowledge.

6 | WHAT CAN CORPUS LINGUISTICS AND LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY CONTRIBUTE TOGETHER?

If we want to thoroughly investigate sociolinguistic questions of sign languages using CL and LE approaches, it is necessary to collect and analyse a variety of data. But why stop there? There are valuable aspects of sign language CL that LE can learn from, such as how to archive and transform filmed

interactions into machine-readable data that can be enriched systematically over time, thus enabling data to be shared, cited and checked by others. There are aspects of sign language LE that CL can learn from, such as broadening the focus beyond heritage and early childhood signers and including data filmed in real-world contexts, alongside the collection of additional artefacts relevant to understanding specific language ecologies. CL can certainly improve on community engagement and outreach projects, while the transparency of LE findings can be improved by developing online deposits of citable data and metadata.

Indeed, it is exciting to consider how CL and LE methods may be alloyed to create something greater than each alone. For example, a corpus of signing ecologies collected through ethnographic fieldwork in collaboration with communities; enriched with extensive annotations of multiparty interactions between a range of people; archived online alongside additional curated data; all of which feeds into the creation of outputs such as public outreach films that are also created in collaboration with communities. These are just some of many possibilities.

Sign language researchers are certainly making efforts in this direction. Some are beginning to extend 'first wave' sign language CL to LE, such as by filming different groups of signers in local ecological contexts (e.g. Palfreyman, 2019) and combining Conversation Analysis with existing annotation methods influenced by sign language CL (e.g. Manrique, 2016; Shaw, 2019). New corpora of sign languages and their ambient spoken languages are being developed, which will enable researchers to directly compare face-to-face communication practices of signers and speakers from the same language ecologies (e.g. Hodge et al., 2019; Meurant, 2015). Researchers are also beginning to collect and analyse internet sign language data that deaf signers themselves make publicly available online (e.g. Hou et al., 2020). These are all promising directions that will benefit from both CL and LE methods. In the words of Mary Haas, 'We gain insight from the outside looking in, as well as from the inside looking out' (1984, p. 69). We just need to work together.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See here for more information: https://www.auslan.org.au/about/corpus/
[2] https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI55247
[3] https://www.auslan.org.au
[4] https://bslcorpusproject.org
[5] https://www.ru.nl/corpusngtuk
[6] http://ling.meine-dgs.de
[7] https://www.korpuspjm.uw.edu.pl/en
[8] https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1032002
[9] http://blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu/BlackASLProject/Intro.html

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