

CODA-International Conference

Passport to Discovery
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By
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Auslan Linguist

(From Wikipedia)

Trevor Johnston is an Australian linguist and a leading expert on Auslan. Johnston received his PhD from the University of Sydney in 1989 for his work on Auslan. Johnston was responsible for coining the term Auslan, and created the first Auslan dictionary, which was also one of the first sign language dictionaries that sequenced signs throughout according to principles that were language internal - such as hand shape.

While Johnston's research focuses on sign languages, his interests within this area are broad. They include both public and academic contributions towards sign language documentation and description, sociolinguistic variation, language change, language policy and professional development for teachers of the deaf and teachers of sign languages. Johnston has made an important contribution to developments in the emerging field of corpus linguistics of sign languages.

Johnston is a native Auslan user, having grown up with deaf signing parents and an extensive network of deaf relatives on both sides of his family.

Biography

Dr. Trevor Alexander Johnston
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After working in the area of sign language linguistics since the early 1980's, Dr. Trevor Johnston is now regarded as the leading Australian researcher of

Auslan (Australian Sign Language), especially in the area of lexicography. He is the compiler and editor of the only dictionary of Auslan and the author of a number of papers describing the grammar of the language. In 1989, he completed the first (and, to date, the only) doctoral dissertation to be written on the structure and function of the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. He has had a considerable record of public and academic presentations in the field of sign linguistics, language policy for sign, and professional development for teachers of Auslan. Currently, he is working in the area of sign bilingual education, evaluating the effectiveness of the approach in the education of deaf children who have Auslan as their first language. Dr. Johnston was awarded an honorary doctorate by Macquarie University in 1997 in recognition of his contribution to the field of sign language linguistics and to the Deaf community.

Introduction

In my presentation to the CODA conference I will be looking at the issue of Coda in sign language research, from a personal point of view and from a general point of view. From the personal point of view, I will discuss how it seems to me that my Coda background influenced my life choices with respect to my eventual involvement in linguistics and sign language research. Though I will deal with the aspects of a Coda upbringing that are probably shared by many of us, I will also mention those unique and serendipitous events that I experienced that steered me in this direction. After this, I will touch on the general question of Coda as native signers – a fact, I feel, that is often forgotten in the cut and thrust of debate over sign language research and Deaf community politics. I will begin this talk by placing you in the picture regarding my own work and involvement in sign language research. I have thus divided this presentation today into four sections:

1. What I am doing now.
2. What I have done in the area of sign language research.
3. Life experiences and choices leading to this path.
4. The place of Coda in sign language research.

What I am Doing Now

I currently work as a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Education (Special Education) at the University of Newcastle (a small city some 150 kms north of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia). I am researching the sign bilingual programs that are running at the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (North Rocks, Sydney). The research project being jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children.

Though employed by the University of Newcastle, I am actually based at the Institute (in Sydney). My research involves evaluating the efficacy of the sign bilingual programs at the Institute. The evaluation is in terms of principles and procedures relating to sign bilingualism. Two basic questions need to be asked and answered. First, are the programs properly characterized as sign bilingual, according to the educational literature? Second, are the programs achieving educational results that clearly indicate that the approach is efficacious in terms of what is generally expected, again from the literature? For example, is it resulting in improved literacy skills in English when compared to programs that are not sign bilingual?

A significant part of the research project necessarily involves the assessment of Auslan proficiency in teachers, students, and parents, since we need to establish that children in the program are receiving appropriate Auslan input and are achieving age-appropriate Auslan skills before and during their formal education. Sign language assessment tools are not readily available in Australia or elsewhere and they will need to be developed as part of this project. Doing so will involve further documentation and analysis of Auslan text (to empirically ground observations about grammatical structure) and the investigation of sign language assessment tools from other countries where available (e.g., ASL, BSL, and other sign languages).

All this is supposed to happen in three years. This may be optimistic given what little research there has been done into Auslan over recent years. Let me put in the picture by briefly describing the history of Auslan research from my point of view.

What I Have Done in the Area of Sign Language Research

I became involved in sign language research in 1980. At that time there was no linguistic research in this field in Australia whatsoever. I began studies in linguistics and simultaneously, in cooperation with one of my deaf aunts, Dorothy Shaw, we formed a Deaf community-based lobby group. Its purpose was twofold.

First, to fight for the use of Australian Sign Language in the education of the deaf. I named this language, “Auslan”. Auslan has now become accepted as the name for this language. The fight to get Auslan recognized and used in the education of the deaf has been no easy battle, and sadly, it continues to this very day. Most teachers of the deaf are still not proficient in Auslan. Most government programs for the deaf in which some form of manual communication is used still have policies that require the use of Signed English exclusively or have no requirement that teachers be proficient in Auslan.

The second reason for the formation of the lobby group was to establish an organization of deaf people that could lobby state and federal governments to have Auslan treated as one of Australia’s community languages. This was particularly important since the Federal Government established a Senate Inquiry into a National Language Policy in 1984. We worked with other minority language groups to implement a language policy that would recognize the languages of Australia’s various ethnic and indigenous communities. Recognition would lead to government support in research, education, the dissemination of governmental information in those languages, and the provision of interpreters.

Lobbying by itself, however, was not enough. It had to be supported by linguistic research. It was vital to show skeptics that we did indeed have our own viable and vibrant sign language. Most of these skeptics were hearing non-signers, but not all. Some were deaf signers themselves. Consequently, at the same time, I produced the first sketch grammar of Auslan and a preliminary dictionary of Auslan, both in 1986. The dictionary was the first attempt to document the signs of Auslan. I also prepared the first curriculum for teaching Auslan as a second language for the major post-secondary non-university education system in Australia, called colleges of TAFE (Technical and Further Education).

I finished my doctoral dissertation on Auslan linguistics in 1989. The first volume of the dissertation provided an overview of the grammatical structure of the language, and showed that it shared many of the same general grammatical characteristics as other signed languages, such as ASL and BSL. The second volume was the first dictionary of Auslan based on linguistic principles, with over 3,000 entries. The dictionary was the only available reference book on Auslan in classrooms across the country for almost a decade. Apart from my doctoral research, there was little, if any, other work on Auslan taking place at that time.

The results of the Senate Inquiry into a National Language Policy was issued in 1987 and it made several references to Auslan. Auslan had achieved de facto recognition as one of Australia's community languages. The National Languages Institute of Australia (NLIA) was then established and supported by a large initial grant from the federal government to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the new language policy. Inclusion of Auslan was achieved by lobbying by the Deaf community, supported by early research. Recognition of Auslan has played a very large part in the dramatic and positive change in the situation of deaf Australians since that time.

It did not take long for the Australian Research Council (ARC) – the most important source of funding for university research in Australia – to become aware of governmental priorities in the area of language policy. The federal government wanted to see the issues outlined in the National Policy on Languages actively addressed by organizations like the ARC and reflected in their funding decisions. The time was ripe for other specific Auslan related initiatives. For example, funds from the ARC and the NLIA helped establish the Centre for Deafness and Communication Studies at Griffith University, in Brisbane. Then in 1992, a National Institute for Deaf Studies was established at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

There were reservations in some quarters about the appropriateness of such an institute at that time. Its mandate or charter had two clear aims: education and research. Some people, like myself and John Lovett (now President of the Comité International des Sports des Sourds – International Committee of Deaf Sports), were concerned that there were few resources in place at that time to support teaching of the language at the university level. I'll come back to this important question later.

In summary, within a relatively short period of time, modest success was achieved on two levels: the linguistic and the political. On the linguistic level this included the first description of aspects of the grammar of Auslan and a dictionary based on data collected through observation of the signing community. On the political and policy level, it resulted in the de facto recognition of Auslan as one of Australia's community languages. Within a few years, there was a rapid increase in interpreter services, improvements in education (e.g., bilingual programs and Auslan courses across Australia), and the telecommunications services.

Research had assisted the lobbying effort. Lobbying had laid the foundations for further research. In particular, the research effort was valued and encouraged. However, there has been a negative side to these early successes. It has two separate but related aspects. First, there has been little additional linguistic research into Auslan in the past decade. Second, there has been a shift in research priorities by both institutions and the Deaf community, and a change in attitude to academic research in some sectors of the Deaf community.

Naturally, my investigation into Auslan continued but the field did not seem to attract other linguists or researchers. In the early 1990's, I published a number of papers on diverse topics in sign linguistics, including: a discussion of transcription conventions used in signed language research; a proposed classification of verb signs in Auslan; an application of systemic functional grammar to the description of Auslan grammar; and work re-examining the inter-relationship between signed languages and spoken languages of the surrounding community. In more recent years I have mostly focused on issues related to signed language lexicography and further recording the lexicon of Auslan by producing the second edition of the dictionary of Auslan in both book form and on CD-ROM. I have been assisted in these recent endeavors by a deaf colleague, Robert Adam, and another hearing colleague, Adam Schembri, both from Rewnack College at the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, Sydney.

Life Experiences and Choices Leading to This Path

There were three main reasons why I became involved in sign language research. First, I had a natural interest in sign language stemming from my own family background, having quite a few deaf relatives. I had two deaf grandparents, two deaf great aunts and one deaf great uncle. I have deaf

parents, deaf aunts, uncles and cousins. Some of my deaf cousins have deaf children, and even deaf grandchildren. There are, I think, about 25 deaf relatives.

I am telling you this because I think it is relevant. I've used Auslan all my life. I certainly understand Auslan very well. You could call me a native signer, but I claim no special signing ability. I'm just an average signer given my background. Overall, my signing is undoubtedly influenced by the English I speak. Nonetheless, I think it is particularly significant that like other native signers, and unlike most hearing sign language researchers, I have a feeling for what is heritage Auslan.

The second reason for becoming involved in sign language research is that I had a chance meeting with sign language researchers in Paris in 1979. I was acting as an informal interpreter for an Australian delegate to an international deaf/visual theater workshop. There, I met the French sign linguist, Bernard Mottez, the American sign linguist, Harry Markowitz and the interpreter, Bill Moody, whom I believe is working here at this very conference. Harry Markowitz, in particular, encouraged me to do some research on Australian Sign Language.

The third reason for undertaking sign language research is that I experienced strong encouragement from a number of my deaf relatives to become involved because they were concerned about oralism and the use of Signed English in education. They were particularly dismayed about the education my cousins had or were receiving. They knew I was interested in sign language anyway and here was an opportunity to pursue that interest and do some practical good.

These specific reasons only tell half the story. There is another more general, impressionistic and psychological explanation that also needs to be recounted. It is the Coda experience itself. Undoubtedly, each of us interprets our life experiences differently, even if our backgrounds are apparently very similar. Being a Coda is one element we all have in common here. How I remember my experience, as a Coda may not only be a 'rationalization' or an exercise in 'selective memory', it may also be fundamentally different from yours.

One theme in the story of why I got involved in sign language research has to do with interpreting. Like many Codas, I did a reasonable share of

interpreting as I was growing up, but it was not onerous. I was the third of four hearing children to deaf parents and it was quite clear that the burden of interpreting fell on my older sister. However, I always had a dislike of interpreting because, rightly or wrongly, I saw the role of the interpreter as being a powerless intermediary. I found it acutely embarrassing to relay questions or messages from my parents or other deaf people, which I often felt were either ‘stupid’ or which, at best, exposed their ignorance for all to see. I felt humiliated and often angry. I either did it and felt mortified and belittled, or I was so sullenly uncooperative and minimalist that both partners to the exchange gave up using me as an intermediary. Worse still, and much more likely, I became interventionist and told one or other of the partners what the situation was as I saw it (“don’t bother saying that, they won’t understand you” to the hearing person, or “what a stupid question, I’m not going to ask that” or “what a stupid thing to say, I won’t say it!” to the deaf person). Modern day interpreters, as many of you are, will cringe at this and shake your heads in righteous disapproval. But you were kids once, remember? What did you do?

Anyway, doing research into sign language was one way I felt I could contribute something to the Deaf community, without being an interpreter and/or involved in Deaf welfare in some way, which I saw as the only two roles that both the Deaf and hearing communities offered non-deaf signers, especially Codas.

Another theme has to do with my general impression of ‘language’ itself, stemming from my experience of growing up signing and speaking. I clearly remember a pubescent “language explosion” happening to me when I was about 11 or 12 years old. I suddenly realized that English had a huge vocabulary that I was almost ignorant of and I started reading books and learning new vocabulary at an amazing pace. I became a voracious reader. I loved discussing and debating ideas.

On the other hand, I also clearly remember that no similar ‘explosion’ was happening in my sign language. Like many other Codas, I think I experience lack of parental language intervention (no reading of books, no word or sign play, no joy in learning new signs, no correction of my signing to show me “how adults did it”). There was no sense of linguistic progression as there was at school. My Auslan simply stayed the same. My parents (and other deaf relatives) had never consciously taught me how to sign properly or spent much time, if any time, correcting me. Sign language itself was never

the focus of discussion, and there was no joy in learning and teaching ‘new signs’ as there was in the school experience of ‘learning new words’. This led to a personal frustration with sign language. By the time I was 15 or 16, I simply could no longer talk about the issues that interested me in sign language – there was not the sign vocabulary, nor was there the audience. In my mid to late teens, I was convinced that sign language was a very poor cousin indeed to spoken language (English). It wasn’t as if my parents were ‘oral’ non-signing deaf. There were signers everywhere in my upbringing – generations of them.

I increasingly moved away from my deaf parents and deaf relatives in total frustration and entered a world of literature, science and learning that held my almost total fascination. I was, however, always fascinated with language and linguistics and I was particularly sensitive to the nonsense that passed for knowledge by otherwise educated people regarding the signed languages of the deaf. I knew they were languages and I simply laughed at people (like teacher of the deaf or philosophers of language) who equated language with speech, who claimed that deaf people had no concepts of time or conditionality, or who claimed that signing was simply gesture and/or universal. Admittedly, for a long time, I still thought that signed languages were seriously limited languages, simply not comparable to the great spoken languages of the world.

Now this drift away from Deaf community in my undergraduate university years ended after a chance meeting with sign language researchers in Paris, where I was a doctoral student in Sociology, in 1978. This meeting, combined with my frustration with absurd speech-based theories of language and my disappointment with then contemporary theories of culture and language such as ‘semiotics’, ‘structuralism’, and even ‘post-modernism’, re-ignited my interest in linguistics proper. Over the years, some of the ideas of my native ‘sign language folk linguistics’ were confirmed when I started seriously researching in this area. Other ideas were challenged.

The Place of Codas in Sign Language Research

Now to the general question of the place of Codas as a language resource in sign language research. In particular, on the positive side, I wish to underline how more or less fully bilingual Codas (in signed and spoken languages) represent an under-utilized and under-valued research resource. In many ways, there are probably more bilingual Codas who have a native-like

proficiency in Auslan (or whatever the community sign language) than there are perfectly bilingual deaf people, and when researching the structure of various sign languages we should always keep in mind that language fluency has nothing to do with hearing status. Generally speaking, there are probably more Codas who are able to give the most accurate translations or equivalents in either language, simply because their knowledge of English is that of a native speaker's. In my experience, relying only on deaf informants is probably a mistake from this point of view.

Naturally, from the socio-linguistic point of view, e.g., language politics, language 'ownership' – signed languages are far more 'owned' by signing deaf people than any Coda, because hearing Codas have more language choices than signing deaf people. However, as Codas, none of us can choose not to use our native sign language when we talk to our parents any more than a deaf person can choose spoken English. But the politics of language ownership is a separate question to judgments about language structure and meaning.

On the negative side, I wish to underline that not all Codas (and not all deaf people) are created 'linguistically equal'. Just as many deaf people come to sign language at various stages of their lives and thus have various levels of competency and fluency in sign language, so do various Codas. Some of us have full signing backgrounds in which the majority of parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins were signing deaf people. Some of us signed only with our parents. Some of us had deaf parents with negative attitudes to sign language or were raised more or less 'orally' or with a very limited or modified sign input. Consequently, our language skills and knowledge of 'heritage signing' (the language which is highly valued and handed down in the Deaf community) will vary.

Being a Coda is no passport to 'linguistic authority'. Though researchers and the signing deaf need to value the language expertise and bilingualism of some Codas, all Codas need to be self-reflective and aware of their actual individual circumstances and true language skills. I have greatly benefited from a Coda background but, without linguistic training, I would not have been able to conduct sign language research in an appropriately objective and scientific way. The key to good sign language research is a high degree of fluency in the target language(s) and the kind of 'meta-linguistic' awareness that comes with specific training in linguistics and language studies. It is not simply a matter of whether you, or your parents, are deaf.

CODA

I cannot speak to you here today without letting you in on some of the reservations I had about coming here, about CODA in general. A philosophical school I was much influenced by when I was an undergraduate, the ‘existentialism’ of John-Paul Sartre, still forms the basis of much of my personal philosophy and worldview. Briefly, I don’t much care for the modern determinist or essentialist belief that people are fundamentally one thing or essence. For me, this has manifested itself in the West in the last three decades in the ‘politics of identity’: race (blacks), gender (women), sexuality (homosexuals), culture (ethnicity), personhood (disability) and now, finally, identity in the abstract (essence). On the whole, the culture seems too ready to believe and encourage the notion that each of us needs to find or admit their ‘true selves’ which is somehow hard-wired (genetically) or socially conditioned (working class, Australian, NESB, CODA, whatever). Only by recognizing our ‘true natures’ are we supposed to be able to reconcile ourselves with ourselves.

The existential philosophy calls this way of thinking ‘bad-faith’. Living in bad-faith means one objectifies oneself and talks about one’s self or group as if it was a ‘thing’. Existentialism recognizes that biology and society makes the individual (in other words, you can’t really understand a person without paying attention to their biology and their social and historical circumstances), but this does not explain everything nor does it predict the future. Existentialism has the fundamental belief in ‘freedom’. We could interpret ‘freedom’ in this situation to mean the human ability to look at the past, understand oneself and then choose to do something or become something which is not pre-ordained by that past. That is, you are not essentially a black, a woman, a gay person, and Asian-Australian, a Kosovar, a Deaf person, or a CODA. You are not an essence, you are a potentiality. I still think this philosophy has a lot to say and this is why I am a little wary of CODA. If it means understanding ourselves by understanding our past, well and good. If it is part of philosophy of essentialism, then I’m not so sure.