Historical Sociolinguistic Studies of North American Indian Sign Language

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This presentation brings together historical linguistic research and contemporary sociolinguistic fieldwork documenting the use of indigenous sign language across major cultural areas of native North America. In contrast to urban societies, where sign language is used primarily by members of the Deaf community, in some indigenous communities, sign language has been used as an alternative to spoken language, and acquired as one of the native languages by both deaf and hearing community members. Up until modern times, a certain number of indigenous communities have maintained traditional ways of signing that are distinct from American Sign Language (ASL) that is used in Deaf communities of the U.S. and Canada. Although considered endangered today, indigenous sign language varieties are still being learned and used by some descendants of nomadic groups of the historic Great Plains cultural area; e.g., Blackfeet/Blackfoot, Crow, Mandan-Hidatsa, Nakota/Gros Ventre, Northern Cheyenne and native communities bordering this geographic area. While Plains Indian Sign Language has been the best documented variety, distinct indigenous sign language varieties have also been documented for certain Native communities of Northwestern Canada (Inuit-Nunavut), the Southwestern United States (Navajo and Pueblo), and Mesoamerica (Maya of western Guatemala and Yucatán, Chiapas, and Oaxaca regions of Mexico).

Historical linguistic and sociolinguistic findings are presented from the presenter's ethnographic fieldwork and ongoing research of legacy materials from archival sources, encompassing documentary linguistic materials spanning three centuries (1800s to present). It has been well documented that a conventionalized and linguistically enriched sign language was used for a variety of discourse purposes across the major North American Indian cultural areas, encompassing twelve language families and members from forty spoken language groups. Sign language was once so prevalent and widespread across the expanse of Native North America that it was considered an "international auxiliary language" (i.e., a signed lingua franca shared between distinct linguistic groups). By all accounts, the signed lingua franca served numerous sociolinguistic purposes and discourse functions for many generations to an extent unparalleled by any currently or previously known case of an indigenous sign language. Among the communities where the signed lingua franca once flourished, it was considered a prestigious or high status language used by chiefs, elders, interpreters, and medicine men/women within and between North American Indian nations. Historically, sign language was used at varying levels of discourse, encompassing various sociolinguistic contexts and many discourse genres.

This presentation features the first fieldwork in over fifty years to focus on the linguistic status of American Indian Sign Language and historical sociolinguistic outcomes. It will address how indigenous sign language serves as an alternative to spoken language, how it is acquired as a first, second, or third language, how it is used among deaf and hearing tribal members, and how it is used internationally as type of lingua franca. It also takes into account language contact and historical change among endangered American indigenous signed and spoken languages, as well as contact between the indigenous sign language and urban sign language varieties used in American Deaf communities of the U.S. and Canada. In these multilingual contact situations code-switching is common-place, plus outcomes unique to the cross-modality nature of signed-spoken language contact, such as code-blending and the co-occurrence of signing and speaking. Evidence for historical relatedness in terms of lexical borrowing and grammatical similarity is presented, along with discussion of linguistic status, change, and resiliency. The aim is to engender a greater understanding of historical linguistic and sociolinguistic outcomes in signed language-spoken language contact situations.