

Inaugural Conference of the North American Research Network in Historical Sociolinguistics  
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“Historical Sociolinguistic Studies of North American Indian Sign Language”

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## **North American Indian Sign Language Documentary Linguistics Project (2009 – 2016)**

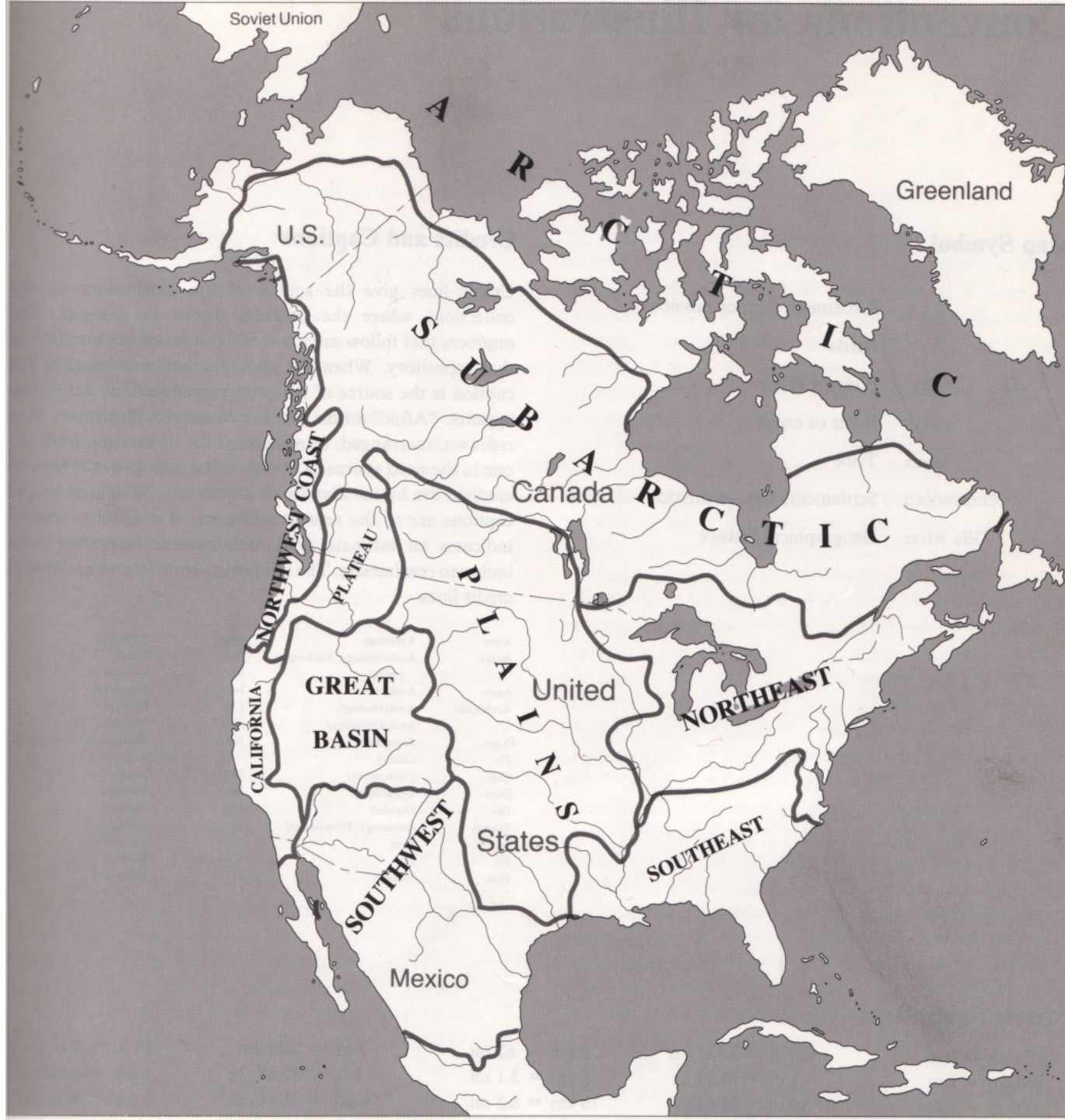
### **Recent Publications:**

Davis, J. (2017). Native American Signed Languages. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. Oxford University Press

Davis, J. (2015). American Indian Sign Language: Documentary linguistic methodologies and technologies. In M.C. Jones (Ed.) *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*. Cambridge University Press

Davis, J. (2010). *Hand talk: Sign language among American Indian nations*. Cambridge University Press

- Hundreds of signed languages (SLs) have been documented globally
- Ethnologue estimates that the actual number may exceed 400
- Most of these are considered endangered
- Generally, two major types of SL communities:
  - **“Urban deaf sign language communities”** where members of the Deaf cultural group use SL as their primary communication mode across a range of sociolinguistic domains (education, religion, law, etc.)
  - **“Indigenous or village sign language communities”** involves both deaf and non-deaf community members sharing a common SL
  - ❖ Among both types of SL communities we find greater or lesser degrees of vitality; i.e., *surviving under the shadow of a more dominant spoken language*
  - ❖ Or, on the verge of extinction due to the loss of all native users who maintained the language for cultural and linguistic identity and heritage
  - ❖ **The revitalization or reawakening of Indigenous SL is linked to how it is transmitted and taught**



# Great Plains Cultural Areas



# Documentary Linguistics Fieldwork

2009 – 2013

**Identified/filmed more than twenty-five native signers**

Northern Cheyenne [Tse'tsehestahese]

Crow [Apsaalooke]

Mandan and Hidasta

Assiniboine [A'aniinen]

Nakoda and Lakǎ́óta [Tetonwan]

Blackfeet [Amskapi Pikuni]

Blackfoot [Aapátohsipikáni = Piikáni = Piegan]

Káínaa = Bloods and Tsuu T'ina = Sarcee

# Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL)

## Documentary Linguistic fieldwork

**(2009)** Northern Cheyenne [Tse'tsehestahese]; *Algonguian language family*; and, *Siouan language groups* like the Assiniboiné [A'aniinen], Nakoda/Lakǎ́óta [Tetonwan], and Mandan-Hidasta [Moennitarri]

**(2010)** Crow [Apsaalooke/Siouan language family];  
N. Cheyenne [Tse'tsehestahese/Algonguian language family];  
and, Blackfeet [Aamsskáápipikani/Algonguian language family]

**(2012)** International Conference (NSF-funded) to film signers from among the **Crow [Apsaalooke]**, **N. Cheyenne [Tse'tsehestahese]**, and from four tribes of the Blackfeet/Blackfoot Nation [**Niitsítapi**]: most notably, the **Káínaa [Blood]**, **Aapátóhsipikáni [N. Piegan]**, and **Aamsskáápipikani [S. Piegan or Montana Blackfeet]**, and **Siksiká [Alberta, Canada Blackfoot]**

See: Davis, J. (2013). *Hand Talk: Research website*. <http://pislresearch.com/>

**Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL)** has been the best documented variety of Native American indigenous sign language.

- Historically, PISL served as a *signed lingua franca* among American Indians of the Great Plains as well as numerous other indigenous groups surrounding this vast geographic area.
- PISL is considered a highly endangered language with fewer than one-hundred known native signers.
- The remaining known AISL signers are deaf or elders in their 70s, 80s, or older and several of those sharing sign language narratives featured in the corpus have passed in recent years.
- Still, many community members (Native American and First Nation) of all ages are interested in learning the traditional indigenous ways of signing and some of the elders and proficient native signers are willing to share their knowledge of PISL.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- **Includes both signed and spoken indigenous languages**
- **Different cultural and geographic areas spanning N. America** (Canada, US, Mesoamerica (Mexico, Central America), and the Caribbean)
- **Indigenous sign language** patterns of use, spread, and lexical-grammatical features
- **AISL digital corpus** includes more than one endangered language spanning a variety of discourse genres and encompassing multiple linguistic modalities: spoken, signed, written, and digitized language samples.
- **Encompasses *multiple* languages, cultures, nations, linguistic *modalities***



# Hallmarks of the AISL Documentary Linguistics Corpus

- **American Indian Sign Language (AISL) Corpus:** features expert signers (deaf & hearing) from different American Indian nations, in the U.S. & Canada (Blackfeet/Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Crow, and Assiniboine, among others)
- **First fieldwork conducted in over 50 years:** to focus on the linguistic status of AISL, today classified as a highly endangered language variety.
- **The corpus encompasses two major types of data:** historical linguistic legacy material (**1800 – 1960**) and language documentation based on contemporary ethnographic fieldwork (**carried out from 2009 to present**) = **200 years**

# Traditional Domains of PISL Use

- Intertribal communication
- Storytelling
- Rituals/speaking or non-speaking
- Distance communication
- Communication during raids & wars
- Hunting and trading
- Deaf family members (womb to tomb)

# Contemporary Domains of PISL Use

- Signing Prayers & Rituals
- Storytelling
- Language Immersion/TPR Approach
- Performances/Entertainment
- Native American Church
- Sawmill Industry
- Deaf Family Members

# *Current sociolinguistic status*

PISL is an endangered language, kept alive over the past several generations primarily by

- tribal elders, who maintain the language by using it with their children and grandchildren
- deaf tribal members, who have found it a fluent means of communication within their native communities

Documentation and research studies of varieties and dialects are still underway

# Conclusions

Significantly, PISL appears to be much more complex linguistically than home sign systems and village sign systems

For example, signing space for home sign is larger; signs and sign sequences tend to be repeated; the number of distinct handshapes are fewer; eye gaze functions differently; signs are produced more slowly and less fluently; and home sign systems are more environmentally dependent (e.g., requiring the signer to point to a color or object in the environment rather than make a sign for them). Home sign systems are typically used by one deaf individual and not transmitted cross generationally.

Furthermore, PISL is different from village or share sign language systems. These differences are illustrated in the slides below.

# Comparing Natural Sign Systems

	DCSL	PISL	AASL	Diné	ABSL	LSN	Home Sign
<b>Conventionalized</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
<b>Emergent</b>					✓	✓	✓
<b>Multi-generational</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	3 <sup>rd</sup> +	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>Cross-cultural</b>	✓	✓					
<b>Status and Spread</b>	✓	✓					
<b>International</b>	✓	✓					

***Metalinguistic awareness***: typically, deaf and hearing family members maintain & recognize linguistic boundaries between different varieties and ways of signing, including ways of naming; e.g., name signs for family members (present or absent)

**Interpretation/code-switching/simultaneous communication** between the spoken and signed languages (depending on the hearing status and sociolinguistic background of the participant)

**The use of sign language spans a range of topics and settings**, past and present time periods, and conversations about daily routines (e.g., arts and crafts to farming and herding)

**Further Reading:**

Davis, J. (2010). *Hand talk: Sign language among American Indian nations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

# Preliminary linguistic findings

- PISL morpho-syntactic processes are highly productive—generating distinct lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) compounds, polysemous forms, classifier predicates, and lexicon composed of indicating, depicting, and pointing signs common among signed languages
- At least one thousand core PISL lexicon items encompassing all lexical categories (questions, negation, pronouns, etc.)
- Rich use of idioms and metaphors



- **PISL is typologically similar to other signed languages**—characterized by certain spatial-grammatical features, verb inflections, and classifier-like constructions
- **Comparisons of one thousand signs** (1800s – 2000s) resulted in an 80 – 90 percent range of lexical similarity between historical and contemporary PISL varieties
- **PISL and ASL lexical similarity** in the 50 percent range, which suggests these are not genetically related; however, language contact and lexical borrowing likely occurred

Significantly, indigenous signed languages like PISL appear to be much more complex linguistically than **home sign systems**.

For example, signing space for home sign is larger; signs and sign sequences tend to be repeated; the number of distinct handshapes are fewer; eye gaze functions differently; signs are produced more slowly and less fluently; and home sign systems are more environmentally dependent (e.g., requiring the signer to point to a color or object in the environment rather than make a sign for them). Home sign systems are typically used by one deaf individual. Well documented case in Nicaragua (LSN). ***What happens when the home sign system is learned natively and cross-generationally?***

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# Theoretical Issues & Pedagogical Considerations

*What's the best way to teach these types of languages?*

- **Globally:** Urban, Rural/Regional, Village Sign Languages: e.g, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Mesoamerica (Mexico, Guatemala, Mayan)
- **Dialects** and mutual intelligibility; the role of ambient cultures and languages
- **Lingua Francas** (Mobilian Jargon, Chinook Jargon, Plains Sign Jargon)
- **Pidgins and Creoles**

*Who should be teaching and researching?*

*Where is the teaching of PISL happening today?*

Tribal Schools and Colleges

<http://www.pieganinstitute.org/community.html>

Libraries and Museums

Blackfeet Community College

**The revitalization or reawakening of Indigenous SL is linked to how it is transmitted and taught**

## **REVITALIZATION: On the up side**

- Generally, Native American community members, leaders, stakeholders have embraced and encouraged more uses of indigenous

**Montana Legislation:** University of Montana and Montana State University

**Montana Tribal Colleges:** Crow and Northern Cheyenne

**Advancing Scholarship:** Master's and doctoral studies, theses, dissertations, books

## **On the down side**

**Curriculum development needed:** teaching materials, dictionary, grammar lessons

⊖ Need for qualified teachers

⊖ Limited funding/resources

⊖ Language Ownership

⊖ Spoken languages endangered

⊖ Linguistic Tourism

⊖ Linguistic Purism

⊖ Proficiency Measures

⊖ Stereotypes

⊖ Additive v. Subtractive

# Contributions of Language Revitalization: Legacy and Contemporary Language Documentary Materials



**Research website:** <http://pislresearch.com/>

**Facebook:** Hand Talk

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