

## **Sign language lexicography : A snapshot of past, present and future approaches, activities and techniques**

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Spoken and signed languages have been shown to share fundamental properties at all levels of linguistic structure. However, sign languages also have modality-specific linguistic characteristics, such as the use of space and a (more) simultaneous organisation. These features can be observed even at the level of individual lexical signs. Today, sign languages are recognised as fully-fledged natural languages, on a par with spoken languages, but this recognition is of recent origin. The long period of misunderstandings regarding the nature of sign languages has undoubtedly had an impact on sign language lexicography.

In many countries, the compilation of a sign language dictionary was one of the first forms of documenting the national (or regional) sign language. It was often an important first step in supporting the teaching and learning of the sign language, and the training of sign language interpreters. The publication of sign language dictionaries frequently played a role in language recognition. In some cases, the compilation of a dictionary was accompanied by a form of lexical unification or standardisation, for example because the existence of lexical variation was perceived (often by educational authorities) as problematic for sign language teaching and learning. However, such (top-down) standardisation projects were/are controversial and often problematic. Less controversial sign language planning activities are lexical modernisation projects, e.g., projects to develop lexicons of specialised (technical) signs. In many countries deaf people are involved in a much wider range of contexts than in the past. This change has undoubtedly had an impact on sign languages, leading to a (sometimes exponential) growth of the lexicon. Lexicographers have the responsibility to keep up with this development.

All lexicographers face challenges, but sign language lexicographers are confronted with an additional set. The most commonly cited practical challenges are the absence of a standard writing system; the existence of the productive lexicon; lexicalisation and delexicalisation processes; and the short history of linguistic description. Until recently, there were no large corpora from which to extract a collection of signs for inclusion in dictionaries. There were limited sources for inferring the meaning(s) and grammatical properties of signs, and for calculating frequencies. Determining the citation form of signs can be difficult, and lemmatisation practices and principles are often (still) lacking.

Despite the many challenges, the field of sign language lexicography has expanded rapidly and has shown a very interesting development in a relatively short period of time.

In this talk, I will outline this evolution, starting with the first sign language dictionaries - essentially word lists with the signs represented by drawings or pictures - and ending with contemporary corpus-based lexicography. In doing so, I address several prominent issues in relation to signed lexicons. I also focus on the emergence of new signs and the multiple origins of these new signs, for example in the context of (urban) place-naming. Special emphasis is placed on the ways in which societal and technological developments have influenced and continue to influence sign language lexicography.