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REVIEWS

HAND TALK: SIGN LANGUAGE AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN NATIONS. By Jeffrey E. Davis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xxii+ 244. \$95.00 (cloth); \$32.99 (paper).

Although the existence of Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) is widely known, even outside professional circles, and although dozens of books have been published about it (e.g., Clark 1885, Tomkins 1926, and Cody 1970; see also Bullerman 2010), very little is actually known about the structure and dialectology of the language.¹ Also, the most recent book preceding the book under review (Farnell 1995 [reprinted in 2009]) provides very little information about the structure of the language and was quite critically reviewed in this *Journal* (Seegmiller 1997). Davis's book is by far the best study thus far. Thanks to Davis's efforts, a real analysis can now be undertaken. His book provides a fascinating and well-written account of the research history on the language, but in my view the author has missed a number of essential points.

1. PISL and research on sign languages. The earliest study on PISL is more than 200 years old (Dunbar 1809). It is similar to almost all later studies in that it only gives a list of signs, but no information on how to combine them.

Academic sign language studies began in the 1950s with people like William Stokoe (1960) in the United States and Bernard Tervoort (1953) in the Netherlands studying sign languages (SLs) of the deaf. At the same time, LaMont West did fieldwork on Plains Indian Sign Language, culminating in his 1960 dissertation. Even though West placed his PISL study in a wider context of movement notation, the two young traditions hardly used each other's findings.

Now, half a century later, SLs have been shown to be real languages, in every respect, and they have become a legitimate field of study. Sign language studies are coming of age. There are now two international academic journals devoted to SLs (*Sign Language Studies* since 1972 and again 2000, *Sign Language and Linguistics* since 1998). The number of academic studies on SLs is considerable, but there are surprisingly few descriptive grammars of SLs (but see Schmaling 2000, Nyst 2007, Masaja 2008, and Hendriks 2008).

2. Davis's book. The book consists of nine chapters. An introductory chapter on "The Language Landscape" discusses the diversity of the languages of North America and the Plains in particular (pp. 1–17). Chapter 2 gives an overview of the "earliest historical linguistic accounts," including possible connections with the now-extinct

¹ In writing this review, I profited a great deal from discussions with Mikael Parkvall. I also thank Anne Baker, Julie Hansen, Joke Schuit, and Ulrike Zeshan for their comments on an earlier version.

SL once used on Martha's Vineyard by deaf and hearing alike (pp. 18–29). Some have claimed an early, pre-Columbian origin, others a genesis in the Plains in the late 1700s; Davis leans toward an early origin. The third chapter (pp. 30–50) deals with the government-sponsored documentation on signed and spoken languages of the United States. Strikingly, quite a few of these scholars had a background in the U.S. military. This line is continued in the next chapter (pp. 51–71), focusing on Plains Sign Language, especially Mallery's work (e.g., 1881). The central part of Davis's book is his rediscovery of a number of recordings in film of a 1930 Sign Language gathering organized by General Hugh L. Scott. Scott's active military service had brought him in contact with several Amerindian groups and generated an interest in them, and he also held a position at the Bureau of American Ethnology, for the documentation of sign language. These films are discussed in chapter 5 (pp. 72–84). Davis has made these films, which are of surprisingly high technical quality and of considerable historical interest, available on his website (sunsite.utk.edu/pisl/). In addition, many photographs and drawings of signs can be found on his site. Chapter 6 (pp. 85–98) deals with "the convergence of anthropology and linguistics" and discusses fieldwork on PISL by Kroeber (1958) and Voegelin (1958), who also supervised LaMont West in his extensive fieldwork. In chapter 7 (pp. 99–132), the author speculates on possible relatedness between SLs, and therefore this is an important chapter. As signs are generally more iconic than words, one can expect a greater similarity in the lexicon across SLs. Independent research on SLs has shown that even unrelated SLs may have up to 40% of signs with similar form and meaning. Three sources for PISL reveal between 80% and 92% similarities, a proportion normal for dialect differences. A comparison between PISL and American Sign Language (ASL) yields between 48% and 63%, suggesting at the least that there were contacts between the two, as their similarities are greater than 40%. Chapter 8 (pp. 133–70) constitutes a "linguistic analysis of PISL," which is not so much a grammatical sketch as a justification of treating PISL as a real language. PISL is claimed to have phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical properties also found in spoken languages and SLs, notably ASL. In chapter 9, Davis concludes that PISL was an alternate SL, spoken by people who had a spoken language as their primary language and used PISL only in intertribal use. Nowadays, there are also (perhaps mainly) primary users of PISL, in the form of deaf members of Northern Plains tribal groups (studied by McKay-Cody in her 1997 thesis). Davis's findings are summarized and placed in the context of recent research on SLs and gesture studies. Three appendixes follow: a discussion of myths on SL, a sample of signs as described in prose rather than visually, and some transcribed texts from the 1930 films. A glossary of key terms (pp. 202–9), notes (pp. 210–24), references (pp. 225–39), and an index (pp. 240–44) complete the book.

Even though this is by far the best book on PISL, it does contain a number of claims that are not very convincing.

The author discusses 19 sources for PISL signs published between 1880 and 2002. All in all, there are 13,328 signs (tokens) in these sources, which can probably be boiled down to 3,500–4,000 distinct signs (types). Descriptions of the structural properties of PISL, however, are surprisingly few. The many dictionaries just provide collections of signs, with phrases or sentences. Published texts in PISL are even fewer. Until Davis made the 1930 films available, only three sources had published connected texts in PISL, and nothing had been added since: Mallery (1881:479–528) has a handful of brief texts; there is one photographed story in Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok (1978:148–55),

containing 200 consecutive signs; Tomkins's work (at least the 1969 edition and its reprints) contains two or three pages of dialogue, intended for use by Boy Scouts (!).

3. Where PISL is different. The 1930 recordings and newer film clips (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky4GZ4sC6uk>), available via YouTube and other sites, immediately reveal a number of features in which PISL differs from urban SLs of the Deaf.

First, in all SLs of the Deaf, gestures are made with, or supplemented by, the mouth, often imitating the movement of the lips if the word were to be spoken. The quantity of such mouth gestures differs considerably between SLs. PISL speakers, in contrast, never use their mouths. There is a good reason for this: all users of Deaf SLs share knowledge of some common spoken language. Speakers of dozens of very different, mutually unintelligible languages, however, used PISL, and bilingualism was not common: showing the pronunciation of a word in, say, Blackfoot, would not help a speaker of Crow to understand the mouthing. Thus, the label "Hand Talk," adopted by Davis from a term used in Native communities familiar with SL, is quite appropriate. Curiously, for West (1960), these mouth gestures were a reason not to consider ASL a pure SL, contrary to PISL.

Second, there is the complete absence of the use of the head in PISL. Whereas head postures and facial expressions have grammatical functions, such as marking questions, topic, or negation, or indicating shared information, in probably all SLs, there is none of this in PISL. One reason could be a cultural reluctance, widespread in North America, to show emotion in public. Some gestures are made near the head, but these remain hand gestures: no head movement is involved.

Third, PISL speakers articulate incredibly slowly, both those most competent users of the 1930 recordings and those recorded in the past decades. Each sign takes a lot of time, and it is often as if there is a break between signs. This is quite different from SLs of the Deaf, where we find many mergers of adjacent signs (just like spoken language words are inseparable in spoken discourse), abbreviations in the form of verbal agreement and classifiers. Interpreters of ASL signers sometimes have trouble keeping up with the speed, but the voice-overs of the 1930 recordings contain regular pauses.

Fourth, many of the grammatical devices common in SLs of the Deaf, such as the linking of discourse participants with locations in space, the use of classifiers referring to discourse participants (SLs vary in their use of classifiers), and the use of space to indicate time, are not found in PISL.

Davis continuously tries to show that PISL is a normal language, by comparing it to ASL, which has been proved to be a natural, fully expressive language in all respects. Most of the space in the chapter on PISL grammar is taken up by basic grammatical terminology, where PISL would also have one or the other grammatical phenomenon, e.g., minimal pairs, compounds, agreement, classifiers. This is not always convincingly argued, e.g., with regard to agreement and classifiers.

In short, PISL seems to be a fully expressive SL, but one that lacks much of the grammatical machinery commonly found in SLs of the Deaf. The reason for this is simple: PISL is not a primary language; it is a language used only in interethnic contacts. PISL is a pidgin.

4. Why PISL is different. PISL is a pidgin. A number of recurring properties have been identified for pidgins (Bakker 1994; 2008 and Parkvall and Bakker 2011): pidgins

can have a variety of constituent orders, including free word order. Morphology is limited and person inflection is very rare. Tense, mood, and aspect are not indicated with inflection, but optionally with temporal adverbs. Pidgins are articulated more slowly than other languages. Pidgins display very little stylistic variation or sociolinguistic marking.

It appears that PISL deviates from SLs in almost exactly the same areas as pidgins deviate from non-pidgins. PISL indicates tense and mood optionally with adverbs, uses full pronouns rather than locational agreement marking, etc. Just like pidgins are articulated more clearly, perhaps also more loudly, so PISL signs occupy more space. In fact, once we accept the status of PISL as a pidgin, all the deviant features among the SLs fall into place: the lack of use of the head, as these usually mark grammatical features in SLs; the slow and separate articulation of signs; temporal and modal adverbs; and the absence of morphological marking.

SL researchers have recently discussed whether there are systematic differences between “urban” SLs and “village” SLs (e.g., Zeshan 2008, Schuit, Baker, and Pfau 2011, and Nyst [forthcoming]). The latter emerged in small communities with exceptionally high rates of deafness, and where a large proportion of the hearing community is also competent in the SL. Some of the village SLs also display only a few classifiers, a larger signing space, etc., like PISL.

5. Remaining questions. Was PISL really as homogenous as Davis suggests? How old is PISL? Were the signs used in Texas in the 1500s or in the Plateau and the Northwest in the early 1800s the same language? What is the connection with intraethnic hunting sign systems, as reported from the Northwest by people like Boas, Hale, and Teit? The Shushwap sign vocabulary reported by Boas and Hale (1890:87–89), for example, relates almost exclusively to hunting activities. Davis’s assumption of homogeneity and continuity—in fact extending into suggested influence from PISL on ASL—leads him to lose sight of the differences. For instance, the fact that some of the SL users of Martha’s Vineyard were Natives, and the fact that a Deaf Institution was located not far from an Indian boarding school in Santa Fe, are suggestive enough for the author to propose both direct and indirect influence of PISL on ASL.

A couple of general points of criticism can be raised here. Davis believes, in my view too much, in the unity of one SL from Martha’s Vineyard in the Atlantic, via the Algonquins in Quebec, to the Plateau area west of the Rocky Mountains. The Plateau SLs are often quite limited in function (hunting only) and rather different among groups such as the Kutenai, Shuswap, or Nez Perce. These SLs (not all mentioned by Davis) seem to have developed independently from PISL.

Davis often neglects to consult primary sources. Did Sacagawea, the teenaged Shoshone woman who was interpreter in the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1803, know SL or did she just improvise signs? Davis has not consulted diaries and publications, only a general study of Indian interpreters.

Davis’s book relies on two sources of information: fieldwork and literature study. The literature focuses mostly on historical sources and literature on ASL of the Deaf. Hardly any information is based on his fieldwork with the few remaining (mostly Deaf) speakers of PISL; one hopes that will come in the future.

6. Conclusions. Davis’s book is both a big step forward in our knowledge on PISL and disappointing at the same time. It provides a good historical account of research on

PISL, an excellent survey of the sources, and via the website important materials have been made available. It is disappointing in that the author is overly focused on proving that PISL is a full-fledged language, so that he fails to notice that PISL is actually quite different from urban SLs of the Deaf like ASL.

What is the connection between PISL and the spoken languages of the Plains? If we compare the number of shared structural features in the languages in different culture areas in North America, we find a reasonable number of shared traits in each area—but not in the Plains: “Interlanguage influences, especially those cutting across genetic boundaries, are few in the Plains” (Sherzer 1976:184). I suspect that the existence of PISL is the reason for the relative rarity of lexical and grammatical borrowing. In an earlier phase, there was probably widespread bilingualism with neighboring languages. However, the introduction of the horse in North America led to massive population movements into the Plains, from adjacent areas and throughout the region. This led to rapid changes in some of the spoken languages, such as Arapaho and Cheyenne, and a huge lexical diversity with very few loanwords. New and mobile neighbors, with whom interlinguistic communication was required, forced the inhabitants of the Plains to develop a new language, possibly based on pre-existing hunting languages.

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TELOCITY AND DURATIVITY: A STUDY OF ASPECT IN DÈNE SŪLINÉ (CHIPÉWYAN) AND GERMAN. By Andrea Wilhelm. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. Pp. xvi + 339. \$118.00.

Telocity and Durativity: A Study of Aspect in Dène Sūliné (Chipewyan) and German is an ambitious undertaking. In this book (a slightly revised version of Wilhelm's 2003 dissertation, done at the University of Calgary), Andrea Wilhelm tackles the thorny problem of predicate meaning, focusing on telocity and durativity, and how these are grammaticized in natural language, where "grammatization" indicates that reference to telocity or durativity is required to explain grammatical phenomena or contrast rather than being present only semantically. As Wilhelm discusses, much literature assumes universal grammaticization of durativity and telocity. She argues against this position, proposing that telocity and durativity are not universally grammaticized. For Dène Sūliné (henceforth Dène), an Athapaskan language, she argues, durativity is

Hand Talk: Sign Language among American Indian Nations, by Jeffrey E. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 244 pp., cloth, \$95, ISBN 978-0-5218-7010-8, paperback, \$32.99, 978-0-5216-9030-0)With this volume, Jeffrey Davis makes a major Read preview Overview. How Teacher Mediation during Video Viewing Facilitates Literacy Behaviors. There has been much research documenting the importance of early exposure of American Sign Language (ASL) for deaf children (e.g., Mayberry 1993), including its critical connection to early language and literacy development. In fact, research has de The Project Gutenberg eBook of Sign Language Among North American Indians Compared With That Among Other Peoples And Deaf-Mutes, by Garrick Mallery. This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. Title: Sign Language Among North American Indians Compared With That Among Other Peoples And Deaf-Mutes. First Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, ...Â The right hand slips by instinct on the heart, His soul, of every other thought bereft, Is anxious only where to place the left