



Perspectives: On the Historicalness of Sign Languages

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This paper aims to provide a reflection on an assumption sometimes present in linguistic research: the supposed youth of sign languages (SLs). In this research (the importance of which we do not question), SLs are considered to date back to the mid-eighteenth century, or even the mid-twentieth century. As historians, we wish to question this hypothesis. To this end, we will question the scientific consequences of a reversal of this hypothesis. The historical method used forbids presenting a hypothesis as a postulate until it has been validated by sources, whose authenticity can be granted. In order to illustrate this, we will take the example of the French sign language: from a historical point of view, sources attest that its roots go back at least to the early Middle Ages. It would therefore be an old language, at least as old as French. From this case, we would like to propose a new hypothesis: that the sign languages of the world are not young. And we would like linguists to consider the possibility for the SL they are studying to be an old language. Would this new paradigm change previous conclusions? To what extent would this allow for a renewal, for example opening the way to another perspective on the genesis of these languages?

Keywords: French sign language, LSF, history, deaf history, linguistics

INTRODUCTION

“Why do you say that sign languages (SLs) are “young”?” was the question we asked a few years ago to a well-known sign language linguist, after his presentation at a seminar in our laboratory¹. We were interested in his talk, but as historians we were surprised to learn that there are linguists who could consider sign languages they are studying to be young languages (e.g., Meier, 2002, 2004 ed., p. 6), dating back at best to the eighteenth century (Fischer, 2015, p. 445), or even only to the twentieth century (Sandler et al., 2005, p. 2,261). He himself had been surprised that this surprised us, and with great intellectual honesty he had admitted that it was an unproven hypothesis. We therefore wanted to take advantage of the Perspective article format for this special issue to put this question on the table. Let us make it clear right away that we are not linguists. We are historians, specializing in deaf history and we wish to propose a historical reflection to our linguist colleagues

¹This text was translated into English with the help of Madeleine Papiernik.

working in the field of sign languages. We think that our disciplines can be complementary, each one keeping its specificities. This also implies that our article should not be read and evaluated as a linguistic article. We do not use the linguistic method, but the historical method. We do not make a typology of the sign languages of the Middle Ages and today. We do not make a diachronic study of the variations of sign languages. We only wish to stimulate reflection from a new angle on the subject of the historicalness of sign languages. In order to provoke this reflection, we present our point of view, that of historians, which is not the same as that of linguists, whether they think that sign languages are young or not. Indeed there are linguists that suggest that sign languages are not young languages (Cuxac and Antinoro Pizzuto, 2010; Garcia, 2010; Wilcox and Occhino, 2016). Our objective is only to propose a debate on this question, because it is not yet the case, and to bring a complementary point of view to this debate, without claiming in any way to settle the question.

THE ORIGINS OF LSF FROM A HISTORIANS POINT OF VIEW

A Voluntarily Historian Article

Before anything else, we think it is important to specify the most fundamental aspect of the historical method. In history, any assumption must be supported by primary (not secondary) sources that can be verified by any reader. Furthermore, as historians, we understand sign language through its primary speakers: deaf people. The history of sign language cannot be dissociated from the history of deaf people, which is itself interwoven with the history of the society in which they live (Encrevé, 2012). Deaf people of the urban centers were integrated into the society. We consider this element when we notice that the sign language has elements of influence of the French language and culture (in its most visual aspects). As far as the transmission of sign language is concerned, we also take into account this social dimension in its entirety. For example, concerning the contacts between deaf people, thanks to the testimony of Pierre Desloges (in the twentieth century), we know that deaf people are far from all being isolated. Moreover, we also have older examples of deaf travelers such as a certain Jacobus de Venetis who is said to have traveled from Venice, Italy, to the city of L'Aquila, in central Italy, in the fourteenth century AD (Pellegrini, 2009).

French Deaf People and Their Sign Language in History

The question of the ancientness of languages is a question that has been present for a long time in the research of the origins of languages. However, these reflections were only posed by deaf people themselves concerning sign languages belatedly, at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, these languages were made more visible by the expansion of schools and by the menace of institutional oralism that weighed on them. The unfavorable context of the beginning of the twentieth century put into perspective the similarities and differences between the SL, especially at the level of grammar. For example, the deaf

writer Henri Gaillard wrote in 1893 about the differences between French and American SL:

“The signs of the American Deaf-Mutes do not differ from the signs of the French Deaf-Mutes because they were imported from France by Gallaudet and the French Deaf-Mute Laurent Clerc. There are only a few new signs, of conventional value, having much more to do with the words of the English language than with the ideas themselves, ideas which are mostly abstract and which it would be difficult to express by the natural or figurative gestures which are the same among all peoples. (Gaillard et al., 1894: 30.)

Gaillard thus pointed out, 80 years after Laurent Clerc's arrival in the United States, a beginning of divergence between French Sign Language (LSF) and ASL at the level of vocabulary, but not only:

“It seems that the Deaf-Mutes of the United States have more signs than we do, almost for every word. So their gesticulation is hurried. Sometimes it is too hasty, when it becomes obscure to those who are not accustomed to follow them. When a Deaf-Mute is what we call a mimic speaker, he amplifies his gestures and becomes clear to everyone. On the contrary, the signs of French Deaf-Mutes are sparse and broad, expressing at once an idea with all its undertones and corollaries.” (Gaillard et al., 1894: 30.)

This analysis, of what can be considered as a precursor, shows that the divergence between the two languages on both sides of the Atlantic has been rather rapid, even though they have a common origin. So, what can we think if we project ourselves over even longer periods of time? We already have confirmation that LSF existed before the Abbé de l'Épée with a testimony of Pierre Desloges (Desloges, 1779, see above). And even further back, the philosopher Michel de Montaigne, in (1580 [2019]), wrote:

“Our mutes argue, argue and tell stories by signs. I have seen some so agile and trained in this, that in truth they lacked nothing in the perfection of knowing how to make themselves understood.” (Montaigne, 1580 [2019]).

But all this is not sufficient to show how sign languages could be ancient languages, especially French SL (Cantin, 2016, 2021; Cantin et al., 2019). We will not be able to demonstrate it in such a short article. Again, this is not our purpose here. We simply wish to stimulate a debate and encourage historical research on the origins of sign languages. To this end, we propose to present two examples of vocabulary of LSF that allow us to point to more ancient origins.

Pierre Desloges' Book

Pierre Desloges is the oldest known published deaf author. We have not found any other older deaf testimonies. His testimony about the anteriority of the contacts between deaf people and monks allows us to consider an ancient introduction of monastic signs in the deaf sign language:

“There are those deaf and mutes from birth, workers in Paris, who can neither read nor write and who have never attended the lessons of Mr. Abbé de l'Épée, who have been found so well instructed in their religion by signs alone, that they have been judged worthy of

being admitted to the sacraments of the Church, even to those of the Eucharist and of marriage.” (Desloges, 1779: 14.)

This quote is also interesting because it shows us that deaf people are far from being isolated, especially in Paris:

“This is true to those who are deprived of the society of other deaf and mutes, or who are abandoned in hospitals, or isolated in the corner of a province. This proves at the same time, without reply, that it is not from people who hear and speak that we commonly learn sign language. But it is quite different with deaf and mute people who live in society in a big city, in Paris for example, which can rightly be called the abridged version of the wonders of the universe. In such a theater, our ideas develop and expand, by the opportunities we have of constantly seeing and observing new and interesting objects.” (Desloges, 1779: 13.)

The first example we want to present is based on his description of the sign concerning the nobility. This description shows that it was based on the visual description with the sash of the nobles:

“We have two different signs to designate nobility, that is, we distinguish it into two classes, the high and the low. To announce the high nobility, we put the flat of the left hand on the right shoulder and we draw it to the left hip: then on the spot we spread the fingers of the hand and put it on the heart. We designate the lower nobility, tracing with the tip of the finger a small band and a cross on the buttonhole of the habit. To make known the person of one of these classes, we use signs taken from his job, his coat of arms, his livery, etc. Or finally the most natural sign that characterizes him.” (Desloges, 1779: 45–46.)

The current sign [ROI] (king), in the current LSF does not represent the sash, but the crown. This discrepancy would date from the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when the monarchy was becoming a very abstract representation for the French population. However, in a dictionary of 1873 (Clamaron, 2006 [1873]), the sign [ROI] is represented with a sash. This is similar to the description of Pierre Desloges a century earlier for the nobility. On the other hand, we have, at the level of the current LSF, equivalent signs concerning the queen and the prince/the princess (**Figure 1**).

The second example we want to present is not issued from Desloges' book (it is more ancient): the sign [AIMER] (love). In the medieval iconography that we found, we notice that the representation of love is often made with the gesture of giving his heart or a crown of flowers to the lover². In this example, the correlation between medieval gesture and current French sign is visible. It shows an evolution between the medieval representation of love, an abstract concept, not based on the fact of really giving one's heart in the literal sense, and the current French sign which has preserved it³ (**Figure 2**).

There is another element to consider when thinking about the development of early LSF. It is the fact that, during the 16th–18th centuries, Paris was the most populous and dynamic city on

the European continent, before being overtaken by London in the nineteenth century. As Desloges explained, encounters between deaf people are fundamental in the transmission of signs. This may explain why Desloges considered Paris to be an “*abridged version of the wonders of the universe*” (Desloges, 1779, p. 13).

To us, these elements plead in favor of the possible ancientness of LSF, and thus of the importance of pursuing historical research on the roots of LSF beyond the eighteenth century, including the impact of the visual representations of past societies on sign language of today.

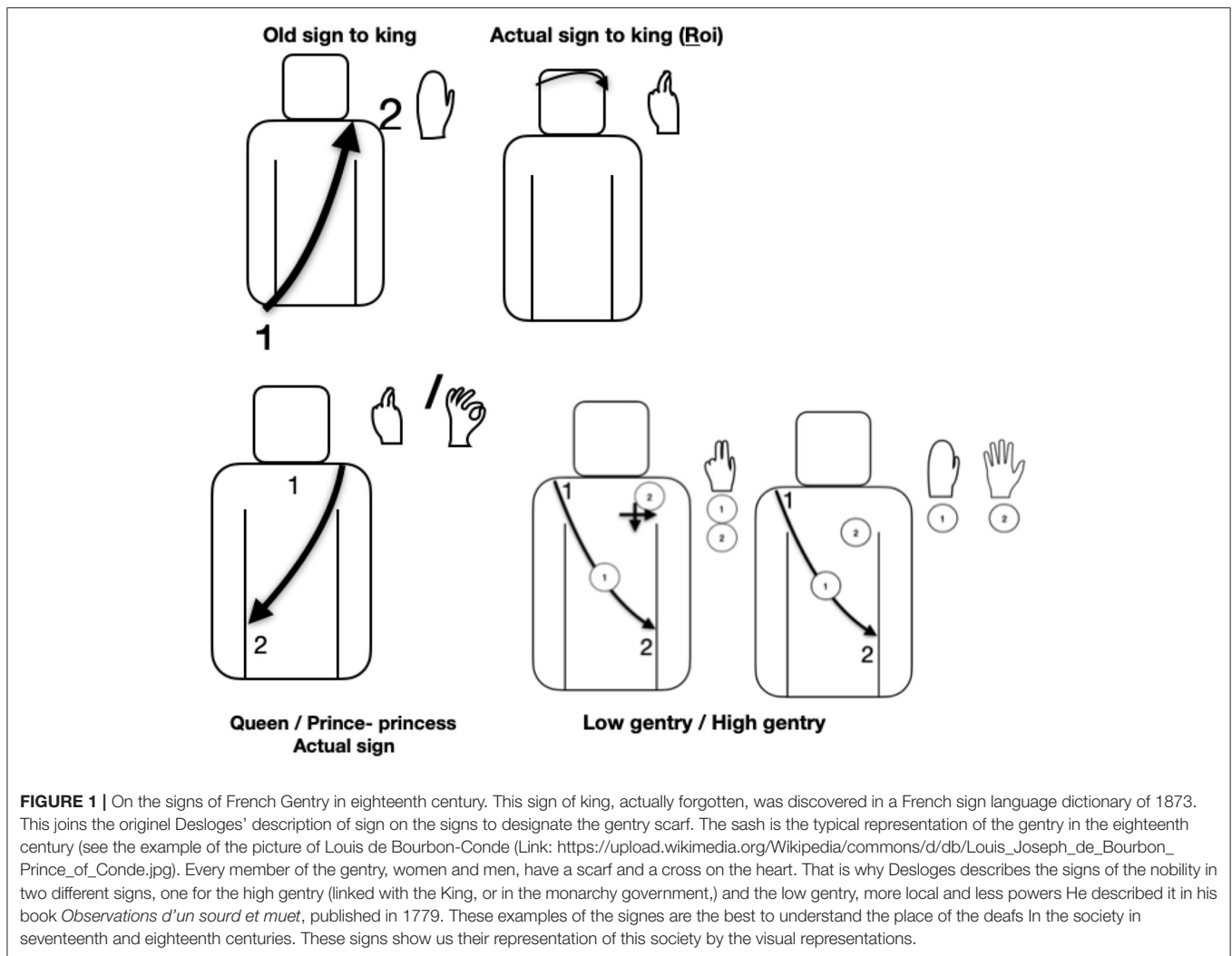
DISCUSSION - QUESTIONS

With these examples, we wish to show that from a historical perspective, LSF can be considered ancient, even very ancient, in the same way as French (Cantin et al., 2019). We cannot extrapolate this hypothesis to all sign languages, of course. However, we believe that this viewpoint could be considered and thus studied for other sign languages as well. For a non-linguist deaf or hearing reader “young” can be perceived as “developing,” and therefore “unfinished” (if one can qualify a living language as finished), even “incomplete” (cf. Cuxac and Antinoro Pizzuto, 2010; Garcia, 2010). Linguists themselves have mixed views on the question of the ancientness of sign languages. Some assume that the sign language they study is young. Others hypothesize that sign languages have a semiogenesis (common to all sign languages). And others have already made research on historical change in sign languages, including French Sign Language, that directly addresses the question of the supposed youth of sign languages (Janzen and Shaffer, 2002; Wilcox, 2004). We do not pretend to settle this question. We just wish to draw attention to the consequences of these points of view on the conclusions of linguistic research. In concrete terms, we propose at least not to stop at the creation of schools for the deaf to date the origin of sign languages. Thus, for example, British Sign Language (BSL) could have origins that go back beyond the first British schools founded in the middle of the eighteenth century, before that of the Abbé de l'Épée. Similarly, the origins of ASL could go back to those of BSL before Abbé de l'Épée, knowing that the famous Signs of Martha's Vineyard are older than American Sign Language (ASL) proper, and merged into it, and could go back to the first English settlers of the sixteenth century. This is a whole area of unexplored historical research that we feel it is essential to explore. Why do we think this is essential? Because it seems to us that, certain conclusions of linguistic research could be modified. In this respect, we submit for discussion two questions often addressed in linguistics and which seem to us essential: that of transmission and that of lexical units.

The first question therefore concerns the place of the lines of transmission in the evaluation of the age of a sign language. Given that sign languages are not transmitted mainly within the biological family if the latter is hearing, it seems to us that it is difficult to reason with the criterion of direct family transmission between deaf people to confirm or deny a filiation

²See here: <https://etusourdes.hypotheses.org/44> (21/10/2021).

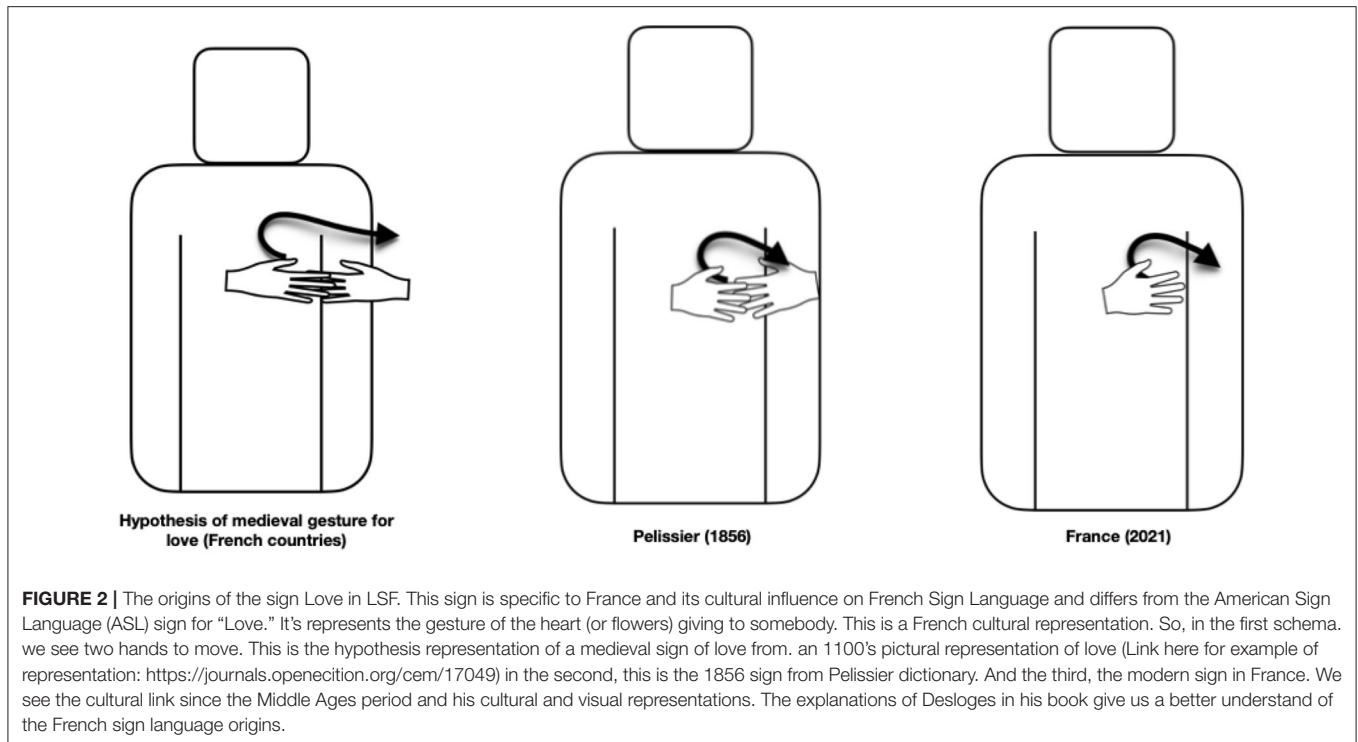
³See also Bulwer (1648).



between sign languages in the same country. Because it is a criterion very specific to vocal languages. Since they have been studied, sign languages have forced researchers to rethink their criteria of analysis. Thus, we propose to researchers to study the possibility of a transmission also via hearing members of deaf families or via hearing friends of deaf people. Let's take a totally fictitious example: let's imagine a hearing daughter of deaf parents (having acquired their sign language in a school for the deaf) who marries a hearing man whose distant cousin is an isolated deaf person (with no known deaf family) not attending school. When this hearing woman meets this deaf man, it is reasonable to presume that she will naturally use her parents' sign language to communicate with him. This man's emerging sign language and this woman's institutionalized sign language will then be able to blend, in a potentially regular face-to-face communication that is constantly adjusting. Thus, there will not have been a direct transmission from deaf to deaf but from signer to signer. Would this man's sign language therefore be qualified as "young" because he has no deaf ancestor or

deaf acquaintances? If he adopts for himself elements of the sign language of this woman's parents, would it be necessary to decide on a minimum percentage (and according to what criteria?) of resumption of signs strictly common between the institutionalized sign language coming from this woman in order to be able to attest to a transmission and thus that this man's sign language is related to the other one and that it can thus be qualified as old? To summarize this example: at what point is it considered that a variant, even that of an isolated deaf person, can be attached to institutionalized sign language? Can the institutionalized sign language alone serve as a standard, or even as a super-standard, in defining variations? Finally, what role is given to the signers in the broad sense (hearing and deaf) in the transmission?

The second question is the place of lexical units in the evaluation of the age of sign languages. If we take the example above, what about the highly iconic constructions described in the semiological approach (see Garcia and Sallandre, 2020)? Are they more, less, or equally relevant in the evaluation?



Why should we use only lexical units to determine whether a current sign language has its roots in an older sign language? Does historical change operate faster in sign languages than in spoken languages, contributing to error in judging their age (Wilcox and Wilcox, 2009⁴)? Some researchers consider that sign languages are as old as the deaf (Cuxac and Sallandre, 2007; Garcia and Sallandre, 2020). Even though linguists may not disagree that sign languages have been around as long as deaf people, we think it is possible that this also applies to individual named sign languages. At least, we would like to see this studied.

CONCLUSION: ON THE ROOTS OF SIGN LANGUAGES

To conclude, we think that the “roots” of sign languages should not be considered as “taproots” (as those of a dandelion, for example). Taproots, with a main root (which would be the national sign languages, officially recognized—or in the process of being recognized—and described in majority), that sinks vertically into the ground around which are grafted

⁴See also Keith Martin Cagle “Exploring the Ancestral Roots of American Sign Language: Lexical Borrowing from Cistercian Sign Language and French Sign Language”, PhD thesis in Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies, University of New Mexico, 2010.

secondary, lateral and less thick roots (which would be the emergent or micro-community sign languages, see Martinod et al., 2020). We see the roots of SLs rather as “fibrous roots” (as those of grass, for example), i.e., a series of roots separated from each other but all of the same size and constituting a bundle that together give rise to a plant. Moreover, we know that trees and plants in general are interconnected, including of different origins: they exchange nutrients with each other via fungi that act as “bridges.” These fungi leave few traces, but precisely these roots connect each other deeply in the past. This image gives a glimpse of the multiplicity of potentialities and ways of reflection opened by this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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