

On ethnic sign languages and shared gesture repertoires in Africa

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The African continent hosts a multitude of sign language (SL) types. In addition to SLs that evolved around deaf schools (locally -as e.g. in Guinea Bissau [Martini & Morgado 2008] and Mauritius [Gébert & Adone 2006] or abroad) and in so-called 'deaf villages', we find a third category of SLs that evolved outside the context of deaf education or of a local peak in the incidence of deafness. Their labels typically refer to an ethnic/linguistic group (cf. *Hausa SL* [Schmaling 2000], *Yoruba SL* [Orie 2013], *Bura SL* [Blench & Warren 2006]), or to an area or urban centre (cf. M'bour [Jirou 2001]). Similar cases found outside Africa include *Yucatec Maya SLs* (Le Guen 2012) and *Inuit SL* (Schuit 2014).

Several independently evolved (West) African SLs resemble each other in lexicon or structure in a way that is unexpected. Thus, four locally evolved West African SLs are found to use the cross-linguistically unusual system of body-part size and shape specifiers (Nyst 2016). This structural overlap across SLs follows from overlap in the gestural systems surrounding them, which are all found to use gestural equivalents of the body-part size and shape specifiers. In addition, surprising lexical similarities are attested across unrelated sign languages. In the virtual absence of documentation and description of gestural systems in Africa, vital questions about the relation between SLs and their gestural environment, as well as between SLs themselves, cannot be answered at present.

It is an empirical question, how wide the knowledge of these SLs actually spreads and to what extent it coincides with the gesture system of the hearing members of the particular ethnic group. It also is a question whether the hearing gestures are indeed widely used or confined to a particular group. Very few studies focus on West African gestures. A notable exception is Sorin-Barreteau (1996) presents a repertoire of around 500 gestures for the Mofu-Gudur in Northern Cameroon. In addition, observations on gestures, postures and bodily behavior can occasionally be retrieved from historical and anthropological studies, as well as from studies on dance, narrative and plastic arts.

In the remainder of my talk, I will triangulate the analysis of gesture repertoires (incl. Hochegger 1978 and Brookes 2004) and descriptions of gesture use in other studies with the results of a preliminary analysis of an incremental database project documenting conventional gestures in Africa (GestuRA). I will conclude with a discussion of the implications of shared gesture repertoires for sign language emergence, typology and the agenda of gesture research.

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