

# SIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES

73

*Guest Editors: Barbara C. LeMaster & John P. Dwyer*  
Winter 1991

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LINSTOK PRESS, INC.  
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## Editorial

### CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES: SIGNED LANGUAGE & DEAF COMMUNITIES

In 1989, a small number of papers on Deaf culture were presented at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings held in Washington, D.C. Since the study of culture is the mainstay of anthropological research, the presentation of papers on Deaf culture at a national anthropology meeting would not have been in the least remarkable were it not for the fact that they were included in sessions on disabilities. This association of Deaf culture with disability not so subtly classified Deaf culture uni-dimensionally (concentrating only on the pathological view of a physical difference) and was parochial in its dominant (i.e. hearing) cultural view. It was, to say the least, surprising to find that the anthropological community—an academic tradition long renowned for its practice of cultural study and resistance to ethnocentric bias—could, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrate the same sort of hearing-culture bias so prevalent in the non-academic community. Though the Association has generally been progressive in its (appropriate) placement of Deaf language papers in language sessions, it appeared that the categorization of Deaf culture studies is not always so well-informed.

The placement of papers about Deaf culture in sessions on disability spurred a dramatic reaction. It engendered not one, but three sessions devoted to deaf-related topics at the 1990 AAA meetings in New Orleans. These sessions presented ethnographies of Deaf communities, studies of Deaf languages, and papers on deaf education. One focus of these sessions was to include papers on deaf

communities and languages outside of North America. These sessions reached a large and receptive anthropological audience, because of AAA sponsorship in three of its research divisions: Visual Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, and Education and Anthropology. A number of the papers were particularly well-attended, showing the interest of mainstream anthropologists in the broader cultural and linguistic issues evident in Deaf cultures and languages.

This special issue of *Sign Language Studies* contains papers from two of the three sessions presented at the 1990 AAA meetings. It represents a partial conference proceedings of the sessions on Variation in Signed Languages and on Ethnographies of Deaf Communities. Owing to travel plans, scheduling problems, and to earlier publication of some of the papers from the session on Deaf Education, the papers from this third session were not prepared for this issue. It is expected that the remainder of these works, and other papers that could not be included here, will be made available elsewhere.

The first four papers in this issue describe signed languages from several cultures: Costa Rica (Woodward), Argentina (Massone & Johnson), the Republic of Ireland (LeMaster & Dwyer), and the United States (Winston). Following these, Carmel & Monaghan introduce the section on ethnography containing four ethnographies of Deaf cultures: two North American deaf communities (Hall, Monaghan), an East Indian deaf community (Jepson), and a Yucatec Mayan deaf community (Johnson).

#### **Linguistic variation in deaf sign languages**

The study of language in its cultural setting, and, in particular, the study of language variation—long an interest of linguists and linguistic anthropologists—is, nonetheless, relatively uncharted when languages under consideration are signed languages. And since cross-cultural research on signed languages is a relatively recent academic concern, it is of more than passing interest to have

this topic so richly represented by the following collection of research efforts.

In the first paper, Woodward develops a preliminary typology of the sign varieties he has observed in Costa Rica. He compares lexical data of American Sign Language with these four Costa Rican sign varieties: *Original LESCO* (a language distinct from North American Sign Language, and used by older signers in this community), *New LESCO* (used by younger signers in this community), *Brunca sign language* (used by one group of Boruca Indians), and *Bribri sign language* (used by one group of Bribri Indians). Through classic glottochronological methods, Woodward determines that each of the five signed languages studied are, indeed, distinct languages.

Massone and Johnson, present research on an Argentinean signed language, *Lengua de Señas Argentina* (LSA). They show how kinship terminologies in the signed language of Buenos Aires (LSA) differs from kinship terminology in the spoken language. They argue that even though deaf people are economically mainstreamed, the different linguistic kinship terminology in signed and spoken languages reflect the actual linguistic and cultural independence of this deaf community. Massone and Johnson thus provide important data to substantiate the existence of a Deaf culture in Argentina.

Instead of focusing on intercultural variation, LeMaster and Dwyer look at intracultural variation to explain how the linguistic and cultural independence of women and men within the Irish deaf community in Dublin led to the development of different sign lexicons for deaf men and women. This paper focuses on the extent to which women and men share knowledge and use of each other's linguistic resources and offers ethnographic explanations for the differential knowledge and use of these gender-differentiated lexicons. For example, though deaf men in this culture claim to neither use nor even know "female" signs, data reveal that while men cannot (as they claim) produce female signs with any substantial degree of accuracy, they are actually able to understand a great many of these signs. Women, in contrast, demonstrate both a commanding knowledge and use of male signs. This paper

contributes to our knowledge of intracultural variation within a deaf community.

The final paper in this collection brings us back to the United States, increasing our knowledge of linguistic aspects of American Sign Language. Winston investigates the use of spatial referencing in ASL at both the lexical and discourse levels. For example, she demonstrates how, at the discourse level, this spatial referencing produces cohesion in comparisons, performatives, and time mapping. This contribution to the growing body of knowledge about ASL is a fitting close to the first section.

#### **A final comment**

Editing this volume of *Sign Language Studies* has been a privilege—not only to carry to completion the works presented at the New Orleans AAA meetings, but also to present these cross-cultural glimpses into those aspects of Deaf cultures and languages that are unique to particular deaf communities and those that may be universal. It is in the anthropological spirit of cross-cultural insight that this edition of *Sign Language Studies* is offered to its readers. We thank the Editor for giving all of us in this edition the opportunity to share our work with you, and Traci Fitzpatrick for her assistance in the preparation of the papers for publication.

**Barbara C. LeMaster  
John P. Dwyer**

## KNOWING & USING FEMALE & MALE SIGNS IN DUBLIN

Barbara C. LeMaster  
John P. Dwyer

### Abstract

We examine two variations in the Irish Sign Language of Dublin, Ireland. Signers commonly refer to these sign varieties as "female" and "male" signs. Because of the historical link of these signs to school signs, the signers in this study were selected on the basis of age, sex, and social network. The sex of the signer seems to explain differences observed in the distributions of signers' knowledge and use of the "female" and "male" sign varieties. We argue that the differences between women's knowledge and use of "male" signs, and men's knowledge and use of "female" signs result from differences in cultural opportunities to acquire full facility with both varieties.

### The history of gender-marked signs

For over 100 years the Dublin deaf community has maintained distinct sign vocabularies associated with women and men. These sex-differentiated vocabularies emerged from two residential deaf schools in the Cabra section of Dublin, Saint Mary's School for Deaf Girls and Saint Joseph's School for Deaf Boys. Historically, the reasons for their emergence are only imprecisely known. Originally, two Dominican Sisters along with two deaf female students travelled to a school for the deaf in Normandy to learn their teaching methods and signed language. Similar to the North American experience, the borrowed French pedagogical language was translated to represent the English language for use at the girls' school in Dublin. Approximately ten years later, the Dominican Sisters shared their signed language and teaching methods with the Christian Brothers for use at Saint Joseph's School for Deaf Boys.



Although the schools were located within walking distance from each other, there was very little contact between the students while signed language was still the pedagogical language. Eventually, the schools developed very distinctive sign vocabularies. (See LeMaster 1990 for a more detailed discussion on the emergence of gender-marked signs in this community.)

For over 100 years, from the mid-1800s until the mid-1900s, signed language was used as the primary method of face-to-face communication (see Figure 1). Signed language was assumed to be the natural method of communication for deaf people, and as such, the communication method was not an issue at the schools. In fact, signed language was used by everyone at the school, by both hearing and deaf people. The use of sign communication extended even to hearing-to-hearing interactions. And when hearing non-signers would visit the campus, the teachers served as interpreters between these guests and students. Sister Nicholas, a former teacher and Principal at Saint Mary's School, reported in an interview in 1985 that:

...the deaf here in Cabra were a community—a deaf community, completely.... We were like deaf people. We didn't speak either. That was lovely for the deaf. (Nicholas, in LeMaster 1990: 54)

Research consultants reported that no oralism (lip-movements, or lip-reading) were used during this time. Consequently, deaf people had full access to *all* communication, both inside and outside of the classroom. One of the results of deaf people's full participation in their educational experience was Irish deaf people's world renowned competency in written English (LeMaster 1990).

Yet, as Irish deaf people ventured into the work force, they felt that they would have more of an advantage in their interactions with hearing employers if they had some skill in lip-reading and speaking. Deaf adults requested that the Dublin deaf schools add oral instruction to their curriculum (Sister Nicholas, personal communication, cf. LeMaster 1990). In response to this request,

**1846 to 1946**  
**FEMALE SIGNS**  
 (Saint Mary's School for Deaf Girls)

**1855 to 1957**  
**MALE SIGNS**  
 (Saint Joseph's  
 School for Deaf Boys)

**SIGNED LANGUAGE**



**1946 to Present**  
 (Saint Mary's School for H-I Girls)

**1957 to Present**  
 (Saint Joseph's School  
 for Deaf Boys)

**ORALISM\***

\*Signed language is currently used only in the multiply handicapped units.

- Δ Women who use female signs are approximately 60 years old today or older.
- Δ Men who use male signs are approximately 50 years old today or older.
- Δ Younger people have less access to male/female signs today.
- Δ Younger people in the Dublin schools today have less access to signed language.

**Figure 1.** At the two Cabra residential schools for the deaf in Dublin, the educational policy changed from exclusive use of signed language for face-to-face interactions (in the mid-1800s) to exclusive use of oralism for face-to-face interactions (in the mid-1900s).

oralism was added to the girls' school in 1946, and to the boys' school in 1957. Oral philosophies of the time, in effect, dictated that the schools abandon the use of signed language altogether.

Many educators believed that signing interfered with the acquisition of oralism. Sister Nicholas agreed in a 1985 interview:

But I believe if they're to lip-read well that the sign does interfere with the lip-reading.... I find Total Communication hard. I tried it here for many years and it didn't work because they really preferred the signs, and that's that. You know, you take a sign, the signs for 'king', 'queen', 'prince', 'lady'... now they're attractive and so interesting. But if you say, "king" and "queen" they're not going to bother with the lips. They end up using the signs. (Nicholas, in LeMaster 1990:220)

As Sister Nicholas points out, the general feeling among educators at the Dublin schools at the time was that the children would not learn to speak and lip-read readily as long as signs were available to them. As a result of the philosophy of oral education, then, the educational language policy changed in the mid-1900s from the primary use of signed language to the exclusive use of oralism. Since then, the sex-differentiated signs have been diminishing rapidly in the community's linguistic repertoire.

#### **Distribution of knowledge & use of female & male signs by age & social network**

The signers who provided the data for this study are men and women who had attended the Dublin schools when signed language was still being used as the primary method of face-to-face communication. This included women who left school around 1946 or before (who would be approximately 60 or more years of age today), and men who left school around 1957 or earlier (who would now be approximately 50 years of age or older). Younger people have not had the same access to signed language, nor the same access to the former female and male school signs. The acquisition of signed language used to be an overt activity—well-sanctioned by the residential schools for the deaf. Now, however, signed language is acquired covertly, as it is acquired at most oral schools for the deaf anywhere in the world. Therefore, in a study

of the knowledge and distribution of male and female ISL signs, age is an important variable to consider.

It is also important to consider the "social network" of the signer. Here, we are using the term broadly to refer to signers (of the age group specified above) who have resided primarily in Dublin since their graduation from the Dublin residential school for the deaf. Because we are interested in the distribution and use of the formerly male and female school signs by adults today, we needed to focus on signers who would still have access to these signs, and would have had access to these signs since graduation from school.

Signers from other social networks who exhibited substantial influence from other sign dialects were excluded from consideration in this study. For example, people who moved outside of the Dublin area to rural areas tend to be more isolated from an active sense of a deaf community, and tend to lose proficiency in (and knowledge of) their school signs. Also, those who moved to other urban areas in which there are deaf communities tend to develop regional dialects, which may not always include the former school signs from Cabra. Because the school signs are still used by the Cabra graduates who continued to reside in Dublin after graduation and who actively participate in the local deaf community, all of the signers who participated in this study were chosen from this group of people.

Male and female signs are quite different from each other. In a study (LeMaster 1990) in which deaf men were asked to demonstrate male signs and women were asked to demonstrate female signs, significant differences in vocabulary were clearly evident. Out of 153 English glosses tested, differences in the male and female form of the signs were observed for 106 of the glosses (see Table 1). One example of the difference is shown in Figure 2: male and female signs meaning 'green.' When women were asked to demonstrate the female sign for 'green,' they showed a sign with a modified Irish 'G' handshape, produced in neutral space in front of the body, in an up-and-down motion. In contrast, men asked to demonstrate the male sign for 'green' signed it with one-hand's index finger on the cheek and a single downward motion. Notice

that the male and female signs in this case differ on each of the three parameters: place of articulation, handshape, and motion.

**Table 1.** Variation in the semantic domain word list.

Total number of signs	153
Different female & male signs	106 (69%)
Same signs, women & men	27 (17%)
Other variation (not by sex)	20 (20%)

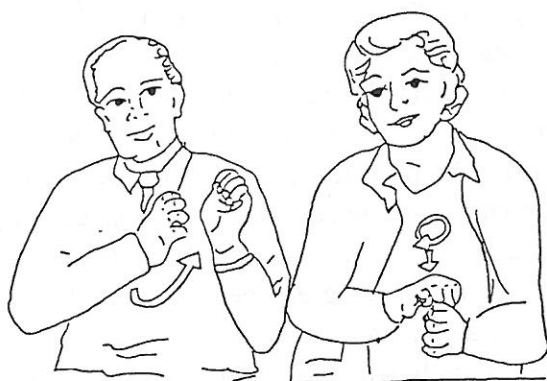
Degree of relatedness between female and male signs was analyzed in terms of the degree of similarity along the three parameters already mentioned. When the male and female signs differed on all three parameters, as they did in the signs for 'green,' the signs were considered "unrelated." The signs that differed by only one or two parameters were called "related." An example of "related" signs is found in the male and female signs for Easter (Figure 3).

The female sign for Easter is made with two 'E' hands. The dominant hand circles above the other, then comes to rest on its radial edge. The movement is circular and the place of articulation is the non-dominant hand. The male sign is also two-handed with two 'E' handshapes. The movement is a parallel twist of the wrists with a sweep upward, produced in neutral space. There is no contact between the hands. These signs are "related" by handshape, but they are considered as different because they have different places of articulation and movements.

Of the 106 different female and male signs analyzed in LeMaster 1990, the majority of them (63%) were related signs. The relatedness of these signs might argue for some mutual intelligibility between users of male and female signs, yet deaf men and women reported that the signs were not understood without actively learning each lexicon separately.



**Figure 2.** Male & female signs GREEN differ in handshape, place of articulation, and movement; they are unrelated in form.



**Figure 3.** Male & female signs EASTER differ in place of articulation and movement, but with the same handshape; they are related in form.

The question here is whether unintelligibility of signs stems from social distance (i.e. a desire for men and women to appear different) or from actual linguistic distance (cf. Blom & Gumperz

1972). An earlier study (LeMaster 1990) determined that although the male and female signs appear to use the same inventories of handshape, movement, and point of articulation parameters, a large number of the elicited items differed at the lexical level. These female and male signs differed in at least one of the three parameters, and when testing cross-sex comprehension of these signs, most sign pairs were sufficiently different to obscure mutual intelligibility. The signs, then, are more socially distinctive than they are linguistically distinctive. Both men and women use the same set of sub-lexical inventories for their lexicons, yet they emphasize their gender through the acquisition and use of two distinct lexicons.

Considering that when men and women left the residential schools for the deaf, the male and female signs were mutually unintelligible, and considering that men and women generally marry deaf persons, one may wonder how this problem of unintelligibility was resolved. When asked, both men and women report that women gave up their form of sign in favor of the men's signs.

Ethnographic observations confirm that women do, indeed, use the male form of signing, especially when men are present. However, these observations also revealed that women do not entirely abandon their own signs. Instead, they use them less frequently than they use the male signs, and when they do use the female signs, they tend to use them only in the presence of other women.

While it is clear that women use "male" signs, it is not clear whether men have knowledge of, or the ability to use female signs. To test this, we looked at the "performance" knowledge (i.e. the ability to produce the opposite sex's signs), and "competence" knowledge (i.e. the ability to understand the opposite sex's signs).

### **Performance knowledge**

Asking women for female signs and men for male signs in an earlier study (LeMaster 1990) afforded a baseline of distinct male

and female signs. We used these 106 baseline male and female signs to find out how well women and men could produce the other sex's signs. Three men were recruited for the production of "female" signs and two women for the production of "male" signs. Their performance knowledge is summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Opposite sex sign production by women and men.

Signers	Doing Female Signs	Doing Male Signs
Women		66% (70 signs)
Men	24% (25 signs)	

Women had a much better performance knowledge of the other sex's signs than men did, as the table shows. These data lend empirical weight to informants' claims that women do indeed learn a substantial number of "male" signs and that men, in contrast, learn relatively fewer "female" signs.

By looking at how women produce "male" signs and how men produce "female" signs, we were hoping to find some specific handshape, movement, or point of articulation that would be associated with one sex or the other, but there was no clear evidence of this in the data. At the present time, the perceived differences (between women and men) in sign production appear to be no more than lexical differences, reflecting the differences in knowledge and use presently under discussion. Men and women appear to use the same inventory of handshapes, movements, and points of articulation, but this issue is still under investigation.

When analyzing how men produce "female" signs and how women produce "male" signs, we found the same types of "errors" made by both men and women. These errors, or performance differences, are summarized in Table 3.

Performance of the opposite sex's signs was compared to the baseline production of "male" and "female" signs, and was analyzed in terms of production differences. When men and women's performance of signs deviated from the baseline signs, these



deviations were categorized into a *type* of performance difference. The performance differences were categorized into 6 types for women, and 7 types for men (as shown in Table 3). The first four types are similar for both men and women. These are described in Table 3. In these cases, men and women either modified the other's sign (i.e. Type 1, or "modified signs"), provided a single sign and claimed that there was no other sign (i.e. Type 2, or "unisex signs"), or they produced another variation of the sign (i.e. Type 3, or "other variation"), which was neither the female or male version of the sign, but some other (e.g. a British sign), yet they attributed this sign variation to the opposite sex. The fourth type (i.e. "male and female sign unknown") represents those instances in which the men and women admitted that they did not know the other sex's signs, and did not try to produce one, or simply fingerspelled the gloss of the sign and claimed that the opposite sex always used fingerspelling to represent that particular gloss.

The women deviated from the men's production of male signs in two other ways, Types 5w and 6w. In Type 5w, a woman produced a dictionary sign that was not the male sign, yet she claimed that it was the male sign. In Type 6w a woman mixed up the male and female signs, claiming that the male sign was the female sign and vice versa. Whether a sign was an actual male or female sign was determined according to the signs found in the baseline male and female signs gathered in a previous study (LeMaster 1990).

In addition to the four types of sign differences mentioned above, the men's production of female signs deviated from the women's production of these signs in three other ways, Types 5m, 6m, and 7m. The three types of deviations that men made when producing "female" signs (which women did not make when producing male signs) were: (1) to modify their own signs and to claim that their modified male signs were, in fact, female signs (Type 5m), (2) to invent signs (Type 6m), and, (3) to produce the wrong female sign (Type 7m).

**Table 3.** Knowledge of the opposite sex's signs: how each production deviates from the baseline female and male signs.

<i>WOMEN using Male Signs:</i>	<i>MEN using Female Signs:</i>
<b>106 signs</b>	<b>106 signs</b>
<b>CORRECT: 66% (70 signs)</b>	<b>CORRECT: 24% (25 signs)</b>
<b>DIFFERENT: 34% (36 signs)</b>	<b>DIFFERENT: 76% (81 signs)</b>
<b>Type 1-Modified Male Signs 1%</b> (e.g. CRUEL - different PA)	<b>Type 1-Modified Fem. Signs 8%</b> (e.g. EASTER - different HS) (e.g. MORNING - diff. PA) (e.g. GREEN - different MOV)
<b>Type 2-Unisex Signs 12%</b>	<b>Type 2-Unisex Signs 24%</b>
<b>Type 3-Other Variation 12%</b> (e.g. British sign DAUGHTER)	<b>Type 3-Other Variation 3%</b> (e.g. British sign DAUGHTER)
<b>Type 4-Male Sign Unknown 7%</b>	<b>Type 4-Fem. Sign Unknown 23%</b>
<b>Type 5w-Dictionary Sign 1%</b> (e.g. AM)	<b>Type 5m-Modified Male Sign 7%</b> (e.g. MASS w/larger movements)
<b>Type 6w-Sign Reversal 1%</b> (e.g. BUILD)	<b>Type 6m-Wrong Fem. Sign 3%</b> (e.g. BLACK for NUN)
	<b>Type 7m-Invented Sign 8%</b> (e.g. UP)

### Categories of differences

A Type 1 difference occurs when the person produces the opposite sex's sign differently from how the opposite sex would produce it. This comprised only 1% of women's production of male signs, and 8% of the men's rendition of female signs.

The sign CRUEL provides an example of this for women. Instead of placing the sign on the neck, as men do when producing this male sign, one woman placed it at the mouth (see Figure 4). The handshape and movement remained identical to the baseline male

sign for CRUEL; i.e. the woman's production of this male sign differed from the "correct" male sign only in its point of articulation.

Men's production of Type 1 "modified female signs" showed change in all three parameters: handshape, movement, and place of articulation:

*Handshape difference.* Some men demonstrating the female sign EASTER used a 'B' handshape on the non-dominant hand<sup>1</sup> (Figure 5) instead of the woman's 'E' handshape (cf. Figure 3).

*Place of articulation difference.* The female sign for 'morning' is produced with two Irish 'T' handshapes (Figure 6). One man produced the female sign with the appropriate handshapes but with the second T-hand between the chin and the shoulder<sup>2</sup> instead of straight out at the side of the body with the hand at hip level while the signer curtsies. The difference between the man's production of this sign, and the female baseline sign, is in the place of articulation.

*Movement difference.* A third type of error seen in the men's versions of female signs involved movement. For example, in the baseline female sign for 'green' there is a circular movement (see Figure 2 above). Instead of producing this circular movement, some men produced an up and down movement.

## Type 2: unisex signs

When asked to demonstrate the opposite sex's sign, some signers produced only one of the two sign varieties and said that this was the only sign for the English gloss. In other words, in these instances, both women and men signers claimed that the male and

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<sup>1</sup> Battison 1978 noted that unmarked handshapes are common for weak hands, and marked handshapes for strong hands. The men's sign may represent an "in-use" version compared to the women's citation form of the sign.

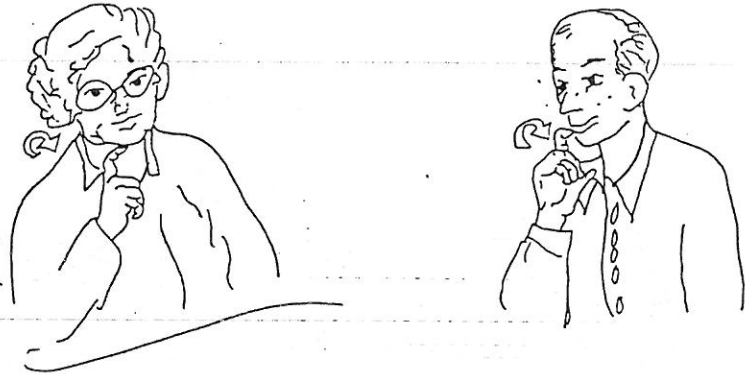
<sup>2</sup> Moving a hand into the signing space is consistent with Frishberg's claim that sign action centralizes over time (Frishberg 1978). Again, it may be that men have adapted this sign as adult learners of female signs, or that this version is a conversational version, the women's production being the citation form.

female signs for these particular English glosses were the same, when, in fact, two signs do exist (according to the baseline male and female signs).

This was one of the most prevalent types of differences both for women and for men, and it accounted for 11% of the women's and 24% of the men's errors. The majority of the signs that women presented as unisex signs were female signs (approximately 12 signs), and the majority of the signs presented by men as unisex signs were male signs (about 26 signs).

### **Type 3: other variations**

In these cases, women and men produced a sign that was neither the female nor the male form of the sign requested but claimed that it is the other's form of the sign. Although the exact origins of these signs are unclear, some of the signs appeared to be foreign signs borrowed into Irish SL. An example of this is the English sign for 'daughter.' Both women and men produced this sign. Women said that it was the male sign, and men said that it was the female sign. In about 12% of cases, women produced other sign variations and claimed that they were the male signs, but men did this (claiming their signs were female signs) only about 3% of the time. These data clearly suggest that a sign currently in use in the community *and* not recognized as their own by women or men is often presumed to belong to the opposite sex.



**Figure 4.** The woman (left) makes male sign CRUEL at the mouth. The man signs it on the neck (right).



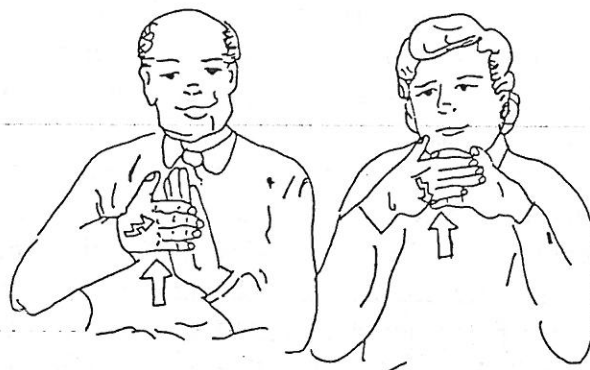
**Figure 5.** The man makes a handshape error in producing the female sign EASTER (cf. Figure 3 above).



Figure 6. The man makes a place of articulation error in producing the female sign MORNING.



Figure 7. The male, female, and dictionary forms of the sign AM.



**Figure 8.** The baseline male and female signs BUILD.

#### **Type 4: sign unknown**

This type does not involve a difference in signing, but simply an admission that the person did not know the opposite sex's sign or claimed that it is always fingerspelled by the opposite sex. This was the second largest category for men (23%), and the third largest for women (7%).

#### **Type 5w: women call male signs "new" signs**

Although there was only one sign in this category, the woman's explanation for the origin of this male sign reflects a potentially powerful source of language change for this community. When the woman presented the male sign for AM, she actually produced the male baseline sign, AM (Fig. 7), but she called this male sign a "new" sign. Some explanation of "new" signs is in order.

The expression "new signs" refers to signs which appear in the dictionary, known as *The Irish Sign Language*, published by the (Irish) National Association of the Deaf (1979). The original purpose of this dictionary was to provide younger deaf people with access to the "proper" signs formerly taught at the Cabra residential schools for the deaf. Since signed language was no longer being

taught in the exclusively oral deaf schools, a few leaders in the community (both deaf and hearing women and men) formed a committee to produce this dictionary for standardization purposes. One of their concerns was that the younger generation learn "proper" signs (i.e. those that had formerly been used at the Cabra residential schools) and thereby be able to communicate with the older generation. To accomplish this, the members of the committee felt that having two signs for each gloss (i.e. the male and female signs) would be too confusing for the younger generation. They therefore decided for each entry to choose one of the two signs for representation in the dictionary. In order to decide which sign should appear in the dictionary they voted. The vast majority of signs thus chosen for the dictionary were male signs, but some female signs were chosen. When the committee felt that neither the female nor the male sign represented an English gloss well, or when no sign existed for a particular English word or morpheme, a sign was invented.

Because some of the signs in the dictionary were new to senior members of this community, people started to refer to these unrecognized signs as "new" signs. Of course, some of the unrecognizable signs may have simply been the signs of the other gender.

Considering what is meant by "new signs," when one of the women produced a male sign correctly and classified it as a "new" sign rather than as a male sign, she was, in effect, saying that "this is the sign which appears in the dictionary, and that it was, therefore, invented by the dictionary committee." However, the male sign that she produced for AM was the same as the male baseline sign, AM. When we look in the dictionary for the sign AM, we find that it is not the male sign. Instead, it is more similar to the female sign AM than to the male sign. The sign AM that the woman produced was not her own (and was not immediately familiar to her), she therefore seems to have assumed that it was an invented sign from the dictionary.



**Type 6w: sign reversal**

In this type of signing response, a woman would either produce the male sign, but say that it was the female sign, or would produce the female sign, and say that it was the male sign. The single example of this in our data occurred with the sign 'build' (Figure 8). If, in a subsequent study, more substantial evidence were found, this category of error could reveal adult male and female signers' preferences to use either the male or female signs. Consider, for example, that this woman believes that she no longer uses female signs. However, her reversal of the signs for 'build' suggests that she has continued to use the female sign without realizing it. It is then possible that she may have unconsciously incorporated other female signs into her habitual repertoire. Others in the community probably have become accustomed to her linguistic idiosyncrasies, and only when made conscious of her sign selections through linguistic analyses or by younger people's failure to understand her infrequently used signs might she become aware of those idiosyncrasies. It is also worth noting that women's incorporation of female signs into what they otherwise consider to be a male language repertoire, provides younger signers and male peers with access to female signs.

When the female signer presented the female sign for the male version of BUILD, and the male sign for the female version of BUILD, another woman was present. The two argued about which was the female and which was the male sign. According to the baseline signs established earlier (in which women were asked to provide the female signs) and men were asked to provide the male signs (LeMaster 1990), this was clearly an example of sign reversal.

**Type 5m: modified male signs**

In this type of sign production, men provided a modified male sign in place of the (appropriate) female sign. For example, the male (religious) sign MASS produced with unusually large movements, was offered as an example of the female sign for 'mass.' The signer followed this sign production with the comment that, "female

signs are just exaggerated male signs.” Errors of this type comprised 7% of all errors made by the men.

#### **Type 6m: inappropriate female signs**

In this type of response, men provided a female sign for the English gloss, but the sign they provided was, in fact, the sign for some other English gloss. For example, when one man was asked to provide the female sign NUN, he gave the female sign BLACK (Fig. 9). Errors of this type comprised only 3% of the total errors made by men.



Figure 9. The baseline female signs for 'black' and 'nun'.

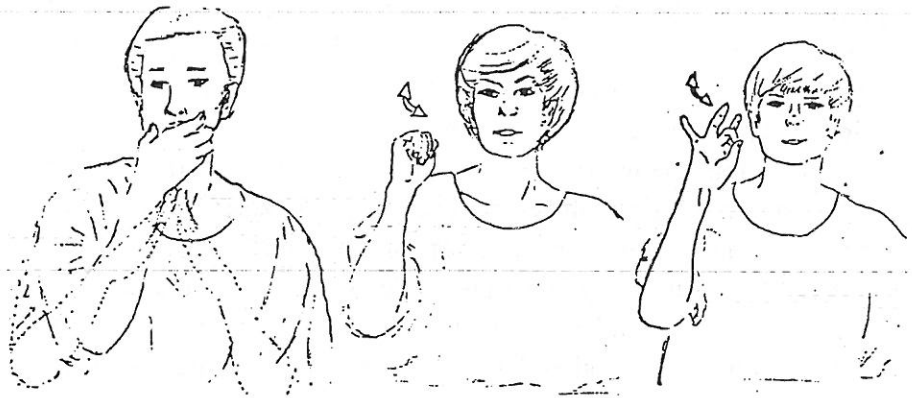


Figure 10. KITCHEN in baseline male, female & dictionary forms.

#### Type 7m: Invented signs

In this type of response, men did not seem to know the appropriate female sign, but offered an invented sign as the female sign. One example of this was a signer's response for UP in which he used two hands, palms up, moving in an upward direction. This is not a sign in either sign variety. Because men claim that they do not understand female signs, and do not use them, we expected this to make up the largest type of errors for men producing female signs. However, it comprised only 8% of the total number of errors. (The largest category for men was the "unisex signs" for which men presented their own sign and claimed that it was the same as the female sign.)

### Summary of performance errors

One of the initial goals of producing the typology of men's and women's performance knowledge of the opposite sex's signs was to understand whether there were certain handshapes, movements, or points of articulation that are considered to be characteristically more feminine or masculine. By analyzing the types of errors signers made when producing the other's signs, we thought that we might discover at least their perceptions of feminine or masculine traits for signs. However, we found when analyzing the baseline female and male signs there appeared to be no actual or perceived differences in the inventories of handshapes, movements, or places of articulation used by both men and women. In fact, our data indicate that men and women make very similar types of errors when producing the others' signs. In general, all that is readily apparent from the performance knowledge of the opposite sex's signs is that women are much better at signing male signs than men are at producing female signs, and that each perceives the other's signs as being different from their own.

### Competence--Understanding the other sex's signs

Ethnographic observations revealed that the women involved in this study understand male signs because they use, and therefore must understand, male signs in everyday interactions. For this reason, only men were asked to complete a competence task in order to ascertain the extent of men's understanding of female signs.

In this task, six men were asked to watch a videotape of 148 female signs, each presented in isolation. The female signer on the tape was over 80 years old. As Table 4 shows, men could understand 59% (88 signs) of the female signs when these signs were presented in isolation. When comparing competence knowledge (Table 4) with performance knowledge (Table 2), it is evident that men understand more female signs (59%) than they can produce (24%).

**Table 4.** Men's comprehension of female signs.

Total Number of Female Signs	100% (148 signs)
Female signs men understood	59% (88 signs)
Female signs men misunderstood	41% (60 signs)

By looking at the types of signs men did not understand, we had hoped to gain a better sense of why these signs might have been misunderstood (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Men's misunderstandings of female signs categorized.

Female Signs Misunderstood by Men	41% (60 signs)
Type 1. Female signs not known	8% (12 signs)
Type 2. Call female sign a new sign	5% (12 signs)
Type 3. Interpret female sign differently	28% (41 signs)

Out of the 60 female signs that men did not understand, they admitted to not knowing 12 of the signs (or 8%). Men identified 7 of the 60 misunderstood female signs as "new" signs or dictionary signs; e.g. KITCHEN (Figure 10). Men gave a different interpretation of, or gloss for, 41 (28%) of the 60 female signs, the largest category of misunderstandings. Their type-3 misinterpretations were of three kinds:

- a. female and male have same form, different meaning; e.g. RED f., BROWN m. (Figure 11)—the identical form makes the mistake understandable;
- b. female and male have similar form, different meaning; e.g. SOLDIER f., SISTER m. (Figure 12)—the cross-similarity can cause men to mistake the female sign SOLDIER for the male sign SISTER;
- c. female and male have different form and different meaning, and it is unclear why the female sign was misinterpreted.



Figure 11. Male sign BROWN & female sign RED are identical. Left start of sign action; right action completed.



Figure 12. Male signs SOLDIER and SISTER; female sign SOLDIER.

### **Female and male sign usage**

The results from the comprehension and performance tasks suggest that men have a substantial ability to understand female signs; they were able to understand 59% of the signs but are largely unable to produce the signs correctly (24%). Women, on the other hand, demonstrate an excellent ability to understand male signs, and are reasonably good at producing them as well (66% correctly signed).

These findings support the folk belief that women learn male signs and men do not learn female signs. However, the findings do not support the belief that female signs are no longer used in the community. Ethnographic observations revealed that women still use female signs, though usually only with women and when men are not present. Also supporting this notion is the fact that men are able to understand more female signs (59%) than they can produce themselves (24%), suggesting that men must have had or still have some access to female signs.

Research on sex-differentiated language, in general, points to various aspects of sociocultural relations between the sexes that seem essential to explanations of the maintenance of such language. According to Thorne and Henley:

Three major themes seem essential in accounting for the sexual differentiation of language: the social elaboration of gender, the structure of male dominance, and the division of labor by sex (the interests, activities, and position of women and men in society, including the socialization of children, and forms of social bonding). (1975:14)

As in the general sex-differentiated language situation, these three themes seem to play integral roles in the distribution of knowledge and use of female and male signs by senior deaf adults in the Dublin deaf community.

### **The social elaboration of gender**

Evidence that there is a pattern of male dominance in the culture is especially apparent in the social structures that affect the lives of people within this community. One such social structure is the Catholic Church. As with most of Irish culture, the Church has

played a vital role in the lives of these deaf people. For example, both of the Cabra residential schools for the deaf were created by the Catholic Church, and administered by the Church hierarchy for many years (until around the time of oralism when the Department of Education took over primary fiscal and administrative responsibility of the schools). Similarly, it was no coincidence that, at the time this research was conducted, the building that housed the Dublin deaf club was owned by the Catholic Institute for the Deaf. Furthermore, the majority of the population in Dublin (including members of the deaf community) belong to the Catholic faith, and therefore, the Catholic Church plays a vital role in the spiritual, social, and cultural lives of these deaf people.

#### **The structure of male dominance**

If we look at the structure of male and female relationships within the Catholic Church, we find a clear hierarchical relationship between men and women: men hold more dominant positions within the Church. Women have traditionally been barred from these positions of power. Also, according to the Church, women cannot hold the position of head of their own household. In this culture's view, the position of "head of household" belongs to the man. Though women clearly take charge of household responsibilities, including the management of the home and the family, they are taught to defer to their husband's (or the man of the house's) wishes. Whether or not women actually comply with this church-mandated direction, the societal perception of "ultimate decision-making authority" clearly sanctions male dominance at a very fundamental social level.

#### **The division of labor by sex**

Among the age group studied, a husband typically will support his wife and children by working at some occupation outside of the home, while the wife will work as a homemaker. Men are more likely than women to go out at night to the pubs, or to social or business functions at the deaf club. Wives are responsible for taking



care of the children, and don't have the same freedom to simply leave the house. Were they to take an evening out, they would be obliged to find a caretaker for their children. When wives do go out of the house, they are often accompanying their husbands to some function. When women go alone to a group function at night, generally they attend a function involving only (or mostly) women.

In public life within the deaf community, senior men and women generally follow these traditional social roles. The men have usually held the highest ranking leadership positions within the Dublin deaf community. Senior women may hold positions of power, but they are generally positions under a male leader (e.g. Treasurer under a male President in a deaf organization). The only clear cases in which women hold the highest-ranking positions of power within an organization are in those cases within which women participate in all-female or predominantly-female organizations (e.g. a women's club).

As within the larger society, there is a marked change in the division of labor by sex among the younger generations. Within the younger generations, more and more women are working outside of the home. More women are assuming positions of higher-ranking leadership within the community. This rise in public visibility of deaf women, however, has not promoted the use of female signs, since these younger women attended the Cabra school at the time that oralism was the exclusive method of face-to-face communication. If they do use either of the former Cabra sign vocabularies, they tend to use the male variety.

### **Explaining the differences**

Why do men and women use the male and female signs differently? Thorne and Henley offer a general explanation for this type of differential usage. They say,

Although both women and men are constrained to keep on their respective sides of the sex barrier, women can more freely use both forms; that is, men who use female forms seem to be more stigmatized than women who use male forms. (1975:19)

As the data on the Irish situation presented above clearly argues, this general pattern observed by Thorne and Henley is true in the usage of Irish male and female signs. Women are more likely to know and use "male" signs than men are to use "female" signs.

The male form of signing is used by both men and women. Men use it (at all times) to talk to men, to women, or to both men and women. Typically, women use the male form of signs when they talk to men, or when they talk to women in the presence of men. Women use the male code whenever their message is meant for public understanding. Considering the broader social use of male signs—used by priests presenting Mass in sign language, or for announcements at public events, speeches, discussions, and so on—women's use of male signs may, indeed, involve some "upward mobility." But, if this is true, why do some women maintain female signs in their habitual ways of signing, while most others retain their knowledge of female signs sufficiently well in order to communicate with monodialectal female signers?

Men report that they do not understand women's conversations when a preponderance of female signs is used. But as the results of the comprehension task reported previously suggest, men do, in fact, seem to understand quite a few female signs. Men's reports that they cannot understand female signing may therefore be due to social restrictions on, or expectations about, male usage of female signs. Men may well not want to admit that they understand female signs. Consistent with Thorne and Henley's (1975:19) claims, the use of female language by men often indicates "downward social mobility" for men.

Generally, women who have never married and women who do not interact frequently with men, have, for the most part, maintained predominantly female signs for all interactions. Although these women who have adopted the male form of signs for use with men and with mixed (female and male) groups don't habitually use female signs for day-to-day communication, they will use female signs with other women who habitually use female signs.

There are pockets of adult women living in Dublin today who still use the female school signs for day-to-day communication.

Typically these women have never married, and interact infrequently with men. These women use female signs almost exclusively in their daily interactions. For example, sometimes public functions such as "ladies night" or bingo at the club will be female-sign situations that involve older deaf women who habitually use female signs. During these activities, women who don't habitually use female signs will change their sign vocabulary to female signs in order to communicate with the older deaf women who prefer to use the female signs. The fact that they use them in these situations, when normally they don't, demonstrates the maintenance of female signs within the community, even if the usage is restricted to certain female-to-female interactions.

There are a few women who maintain virtually invariant use of female signs for day-to-day use, even though they interact frequently with men. These women are singled out by younger community members (i.e. women under 55 years of age) as being hard to understand, or as using an old-fashioned way of signing. There is one married woman in particular who is known for "inappropriate" use of female signs (according to judgments of other senior men and women). She uses her female signs with her deaf husband, and deaf children and with other deaf adult men and women in the community. She has not abandoned her female signs in favor of male signs for mixed male-female communication as most other women in her position have done.

Both men and women have occasional public access to female signs. At some religious retreats, two platform interpreters are provided. One interpreter uses male signs, while the other uses female signs. The fact that two interpreters are provided at these retreats reflects the shared understanding that there will be women in the audience who would not readily understand the male signs, or who would understand the female signs more easily.

These sociolinguistic patterns of female sign usage suggest that the female signs are rarely used within the community. They seem to be reserved for use with senior women who do not interact often with men. However, if this restricted usage pattern were completely true, then it seems that women should have forgotten most of their

female signs by now, or that they should have at least had great hesitancy in recalling the female signs during elicitation sessions (after all, it had been between approximately 45 to 70 years since these women left school). If they had abandoned their female signs in favor of male signs, then they should, by now, find it difficult to recall their female signs.<sup>1</sup>

But this was not the case, as the data in an earlier study clearly showed (LeMaster 1990). All female informants readily and accurately recalled the majority of female signs asked for during the elicitation sessions. A few women did occasionally use the male sign instead of the female sign in response to an elicitation request, but the percentage of this occurrence was quite low. This suggests that women are still using the female signs with sufficient frequency to recall them easily.

Though men cannot produce female signs consistently, they seem to have a fair understanding of even the most archaic female signs. Recall that they understood approximately 60% of the female signs in isolation (see Table 4 above). This suggests that men also have had opportunities to see these signs in use, and they have seen them frequently enough to be able to comprehend many female signs quite well (even when these female signs are presented in isolation).

#### Language attitudes & gender-labeled signs

The analyses presented here clearly indicate that men and women have different productive and comprehensive knowledge of male and female signs. Men use male signs almost exclusively, while women use both male and female signs in accordance with the demands of their social networks. The fact that women do use "male" signs raises the question whether the term "male" is an appropriate label for this type of signing. Deaf people themselves

<sup>1</sup> Psychological research in memory (e.g., Rubenstein & Rubenstein 1971, Forster & Chambers 1973, and Atkinson & Juola 1974) has found that response time for the recall of lexical items (as in the task performed by the deaf informants) is affected by how recently something has been seen, or used. These theories of memory posit that items most active in memory are retrieved most readily and accurately. Conversely, items not recently accessed or practiced will be difficult, if not impossible, to recover.

use these labels to refer to the different signs. But what do these labels really mean to the community in the context of female and male relationships? As we have discussed previously, women, as well as men, use the male form of signs. Why, then, refer to this type of signing as "male"?

The answer to this question lies, in large part, with the different opportunities for deaf girls and boys to gain access to the other's vocabulary. As we described previously, boys acquired male signs, and girls acquired female signs at the Cabra residential schools for the deaf. The labels "male" and "female," then, refer to a kind of "first language" situation. These signs only become available to the opposite sex after the students have graduated from the residential schools, and have started to interact with each other. Acquiring the other's sign lexicon as adults becomes a kind of "second language" acquisition. Proprietorship of the lexicon remains with the "first language" users.

Though the term "male signs" is not appropriate for today's users (considering that both men and women employ these signs for most face-to-face interactions) the label clearly reflects the historical origin of these signs. The label also suggests a proprietorship of men over these signs, which is supported by ethnographic observations of women (as second-language users of the male vocabulary) seeking guidance from men on the "correct" way to produce male signs.

The term "female signs," on the other hand, more accurately reflects both the historical origin of the signs and the current-day use. Senior men and women of this community consider these signs to be the property of women. Moreover, senior men generally *do not want* to exhibit any "ownership" of "female language." Men simply will not use female signs for fear that they will be ridiculed for appearing effeminate. Demonstrating the strength of this belief (by violating it) is the example of a man in the community (who was approximately 45 years old in 1986), who generally prefers many female signs and is not embarrassed to use them in public. His male contemporaries openly joke about this man by saying that he must have "a lot of female hormones." This act of ridicule is

consistent with usage patterns of other sex-differentiated languages according to Thorne and Henley. They say that "...men who 'talk like women' are called 'effeminate' and regarded with disdain (1975:19)."<sup>1</sup>

Another way in which men distance themselves from the female form of signs is to make fun of the signs themselves. Men claim that certain female signs look as if they refer to female body parts, or to bodily functions. For example, one sign which may incorporate an aspect of iconicity is the female sign for 'milk' (see Figure 13 below). Men joke about this sign saying that it looks like the suckling of breast milk. Another female sign which is often the focus of a joke is the sign for 'soldier' (see Figure 12 above). Men claim that this sign looks like a woman is talking about her breasts. Since it does not resemble the male sign for 'soldier' (and men probably did not initially know its meaning when they first saw it), men make fun of the sign.

Male derision of female signs has had an effect on some women's perceptions of certain female signs, and, in some cases, on their attitudes toward female signs in general. During elicitation sessions, some women refused to demonstrate the few female signs which have been sources of humor by men. Instead, they would fingerspell these signs, and say that there was no female sign, for example, for 'milk' or 'soldier.' Also, during taped interviews in which women were asked why they have abandoned their female signs in favor of using male signs, some women said that male signs are "nicer" than female signs. They claimed that male signs are more aesthetically pleasing than female signs, and would often show signs such as 'milk' and 'soldier' as examples of how the male signs are superior.

The differential use of female and male signs in this community has had an effect similar to what West and Zimmerman found in their study of female and male interruptions in spoken English. In

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<sup>1</sup> Hass (1944:229) reports on a language in which the opposite language attitude obtains: men find women's speech more pleasing than men's speech. Women speak "easy, slow, and soft. It sounds pretty. Men's speech has too much sss."

their study, they found that men tend to interrupt women more often than women interrupt men. They made the claim that this conversational pattern perpetuates a hierarchical social difference between men and women. They say that:

The asymmetry in the initiation of interruption, insofar as it is a stable feature of the verbal interaction between men and women in this society, constitutes a power differential readily found in both ordinary and extraordinary settings in which men and women come together to talk.... It is, in other words, a way of "doing" power in face-to-face interaction, and to the extent that power is implicated in what it means to be a man vis-a-vis a woman, it is a way of "doing" gender as well. (West & Zimmerman 1983:111)

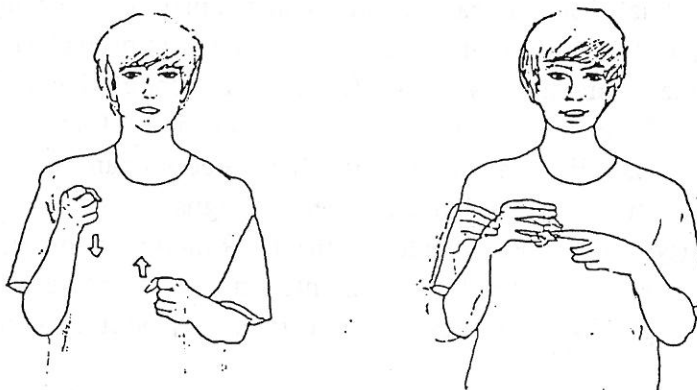


Figure 13. Male sign and female sign MILK.

In the Irish language situation, the differential use of female and male signs by men and women also "constitutes a power differential" between men and women. The use of these sex-differentiated vocabularies perpetuates the social asymmetry between the sexes, and marks the signer's sex identity in every interaction. However, when women adopt male signs instead of female signs, they linguistically elevate their status to that of men, and simultaneously negate the linguistic marking of sex.

This desire to enjoy some version of male linguistic status may be one reason why women choose to adopt the male form of signs. Nevertheless, the social asymmetry between men and women continues to be perpetuated through language by the community's conscious marking of these two types of sign variations. The labels employed to refer to "male" and "female" signs continue to reify societal male dominance since men do not use "female" signs, and women do use "male" signs. The very fact that informants refer to women's use of "male" signs suggests that this usage is marked, and therefore subtly stigmatizes the women who attempt this linguistic "elevation."

### Conclusions

The issue of "male" and "female" language status may soon become a non-issue for this community. Since the introduction of exclusive oralism in the Cabra schools, sex-differentiated vocabularies have been rapidly diminishing in the linguistic repertoires of younger signers in the Dublin deaf community. The predominant use of male signs continues today, but a few female signs are also being maintained (typically those included in the 1979 dictionary of Irish Sign Language). Interestingly, the maintenance of these female signs by younger signers is a behavior sustained by both men and women.<sup>1</sup>

One explanation for this is that the linkage of these female signs to the girls' residential school in Cabra has been lost among the younger generation. Instead of recognizing these signs as formerly female signs, the younger generation points to the 1979 dictionary as the originator of these "new" (to them) signs. For example, when eliciting signs from two men in their early twenties, these men produced the female signs for the days of the week, Monday through Friday. When the men were asked why they chose to use the "old female school signs rather than the male signs" they

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<sup>1</sup> For a tentative explanation of language change in the Dublin deaf community, diminishing use of sex-differentiated language, and effects of oralism, see LeMaster 1990, Ch. 5.



vehemently denied that the signs were female signs at all. Instead, they claimed that these signs were "new" signs from the dictionary, and certainly not female signs.

This loss of historical knowledge regarding the origin of sign variation in the community has actually produced a kind of freedom not available to the older generation. Among the more senior population, men do not feel free to employ female signs. If they do use them (as in the example presented above) they face ridicule from both men and women. However, once this historical connection of gender and sign has been lost, more people in the younger generation feel free to employ formerly female signs (at least those signs which are found in the 1979 dictionary). For the younger men, there is no risk of ridicule since, for them, they are simply using "new" signs. For the younger women, there is no question of status elevation or stigmatization for the same reason; they are simply using "new" signs. This is a rich area for future research.

Finally, research should continue among the more senior population who still employ both varieties and recognize the historical connections of these signs to women and men. We know that the use of female signs is rapidly diminishing in the linguistic repertoires of younger signers today, and that male signs are for the most part continuing (among many other sign variations). This resulting language situation raises at least two questions: Are female signs diminishing because they are associated with the sex of the speaker, or, are they diminishing because there is limited access to one variety but not to the other? Recent research (LeMaster 1990) suggests that the latter may well be the case. Moreover, it is evident that the historical origins of these signs as they are linked to women and men are indeed being lost. However, senior men's claim that they don't understand female signs when they demonstrably do and can produce them suggests that more research into the actual usage of female signs by the senior population would help us better to address issues of language maintenance, sociolinguistic meaning, and subsequent language change in this community.

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*The authors wish to dedicate this paper to the memory of Devin John and Jeremy LeMaster-Dwyer, and to thank Loretta Lupo for her assistance with the illustrations.*

