

This paper presents the results from the first study in the “Sociolinguistic Variation in Australian Sign Language (Auslan)” project (Schembri & Johnston, 2004). This major project is a replication in the Australian deaf community of quantitative investigations into variation in American Sign Language (ASL) conducted by Lucas, Bayley, and Valli (2001). In this specific study, we consider variation in the location parameter in a class of Auslan signs that include THINK, NAME and CLEVER. In their citation form, these signs (like signs in the same class in ASL) are produced in contact with, in proximity to, or at same height as the signer’s forehead, but often may be produced at locations lower than the forehead, either on other parts of the signer’s body (such as at the cheek) or in the space in front of the signer’s chest. Here we present an analysis of 2,446 tokens of signs from this class collected from 205 deaf signers of Auslan in five sites across Australia (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide). The results indicate that the variation in the use of the location parameter in these signs reflects both linguistic and social factors, as has also been reported for ASL. Like the American study, we find evidence that the lowering of this class of signs reflects a language change in progress, led by younger people and individuals from the larger urban centres (and thus, unlike patterns language change in Australian English reported by Horvath & Horvath, 2002, represents an example of cascade diffusion). Despite similarities with ASL, however, we find that some of the particular factors at work, and the kinds of influence they have on variation in location, appear to differ in Auslan and ASL. For example, our results suggest relatively more influence on this variation from the immediate phonological environment than is reported for ASL, and also that this example of change is one led by women. Moreover, our results suggest the lexical frequency also plays a role, a factor not considered in the ASL study. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the understanding of sociolinguistic variation in signed and spoken languages.

References

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