Ulrike Zeshan and Connie de Vos (eds.), *Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2012. € 99.95 / $ 140.00 (vii + 413 pages). ISBN 978–1614512035.

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This book is an impressive volume of anthropological and linguistic perspectives of researchers who have conducted in-depth fieldwork in eleven rural signing communities across the world. Following an introduction by the editors, the volume is split into two parts. The first part occupies three-fourths of the volume, as it covers a vast array of topics concerning description, documentation, and field-work practice in rural signing communities (Kusters; Adone, Bauer, Cumberbatch & Maypilama; Kisch; de Vos; Lanesman & Meir; Schuit; Le Guen; Nonaka; Dikyuva, Escobedo Delgado, Panda & Zeshan). The second part catalogs short up-dated profiles of several rural signing communities (Kusters; Panda; Lanesman & Meir; Kisch; Nonaka; Escobedo Delgado; de Vos; Cumberbatch; Schuit; Dikyuva; Maypilama & Adone). As the first part forms the heart of the volume, it is likewise the focus of this review.

In recent decades, the phenomenon in which a sign language emerges in a rural community with a statistically above-average incidence of hereditary deaf-ness has caught the attention of the scientific community. These sign languages are captivatingly but somewhat inaccurately referred to as *village sign languages.* To a lesser extent, they are also referred to as *indigenous sign languages* (Woodward 2000; Nonaka 2009), *shared sign languages* (Nyst 2012), and *rural sign languages* (de Vos 2012). Such terms are used to distinguish them from sign languages that emerge in urban communities, where the capital 'D'eaf community is typically concentrated around a school for the deaf. These sign languages of Deaf communities have been labeled as *national sign languages* (Woodward 2000), *deaf community sign languages* (Meir et al. 2010), and *urban sign languages* (de Vos & Zeshan, introduction to the volume).

The terminology sets up a putative dichotomy of sign language varieties based on their sociolinguistic origins and contexts, which overgeneralizes and oversimplifies the actual variation of sign language varieties in village communities, as the editors point out in their introduction. Consider the problem of the term "village". Algerian Jewish Sign Language (AJSL) first emerged in a small, exclusive Jewish enclave in the Algerian city of Ghardaia and then migrated to Israel and France

via mass exodus; thus AJSL is considered a "village sign language without a village" (Lanesman & Meir). Alipur Sign Language developed in a Muslim enclave that has a population of 20,000 inhabitants, which does not fit the standard notion of a village (Panda). Mardin Sign Language developed in an extended family of 40 signers, both deaf and hearing, who originally inhabited the village of Mardin in Turkey (Dikyuva). Yolngu Sign Language originated as an alternate sign language for hearing members of the Yolngu aboriginal community in Australia and was adopted as a primary means of communication by a small group of deaf members of the same community (Maypilama & Adone). Yet it appears that many of these sign languages are lumped together in one rather broad group because in these signing communities, deaf people are integrated into the mainstream of village life and deafness is treated as a human constant, not as an impairment. Moreover, the practice of signing is shared by both deaf and hearing members of a community, not primarily by the deaf, which is best conveyed by the term *shared sign language* (Nyst 2012), which is in turn based on Kisch's proposed term *shared signing community* (Kisch 2008, this volume). However, for the ease of readership here, I adopt the term *village sign language,* while keeping in mind the problematic connotations of that term.

Whilst village sign languages have appeared and disappeared over time, only a handful of them has been documented and described in sporadic and often one-time publications (Kakumasu 1968; Washabaugh 1979; Groce 1985). The previous research on village sign languages pales by comparison to that on sign languages of Deaf communities. This is hardly surprising given how the field of sign linguistics was initiated by William Stokoe's groundbreaking research on American Sign Language (ASL) in the 1960s. The field expanded as a result of further research on ASL and later, several Western European and East Asian sign languages. However, sign language research is far from complete. In a letter to the editor of *Science*, Meier notes that "there has never been a thorough survey of the world's sign languages" (Meier 2000: 1965). Therein lies the problem — but this is slowly changing. The publication of *Sign Languages in Village Communities*, a collaborative outcome of the EuroBABEL project, 'Endangered Sign Languages in Village Communities' a.k.a. VillageSign, heralds an expansion in the current sampling of sign languages under investigation.

The value of surveying the world's sign languages, including village sign languages, is multi-fold. In their thought-provoking introduction, the editors highlight the typological contribution of village sign languages to sign language typology. Village sign languages can greatly expand our understanding of signed language linguistics by testing existing sign language universals and teasing apart modality effects from non-modality ones on the organization of the linguistic structure of sign languages. The use of signing space for grammar has long been assumed to be

universal in sign languages. One well-documented example is directional verbs — a group of verbs which move from one location to another location in signing space for marking grammatical/semantic roles of arguments. To date, directional verbs have been reported in virtually all sign languages of Deaf communities studied (see Mathur & Rathmann (2012) for a recent overview). The prevalence of directional verbs was interpreted to be a universal effect of the visual-gestural modality on the structure of sign languages (Meier 2002), but the editors point to the linguistic analysis of two village sign languages that suggest otherwise (Nyst 2007; de Vos 2012). Directional verbs are absent from Kata Kolok (KK), whereas they are present in Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL). This raises the possibility of how directionality may not be actually universal and perhaps not specific to the modality of signed languages. The editors stress that any generalizations based on the correlation between the sociolinguistic setting of a sign language and its linguistic structure are unwarranted without further scrutiny.

This is not to say that the sociolinguistic setting of speech and/or sign communities should be disregarded for typological study. Adone, Bauer, Cumberbatch & Maypilama make a qualitative comparison of basic color terms in two typologically unrelated and sociolinguistically distinct village sign languages, Yolngu Sign Language (YSL) of Australia and Konchri Sain (KS) of Jamaica. YSL is primarily used as an alternate sign language of a traditionally nomadic Aboriginal community whereas KS is used by bilingual deaf signers who also use ASL-based Jamaican Sign Language and are scattered across several villages. The researchers report that both languages exhibit a more restricted range of lexicalized color terms compared to those of the surrounding spoken and signed languages and utilize pointing to colors as a strategy of referring to non-lexicalized color terms. They speculate that the findings may be attributed to the small size and the scattered composition of these signing communities. Echoing the editors' caution, the researchers avoid making any generalizations about color terms across sign languages on account of qualitative and quantitative differences of data in research.

Apart from the sociolinguistic setting of a speech/sign community, one has to wonder about the extent of the influence of other aspects of the environment, if any, on the form and function of a sign language. This question is explored in Schuit's essay, wherein she gives a general overview of multiple external influences — geography, demography, gestures, and language contact — on Inuit Sign Language (IUR), the language mainly used by deaf Inuit in northern Canada. One interesting finding reported here is that the extremely cold climate of the Arctic motivates signers to keep their conversations short and essential. Yet the climate does not appear to constrain the set of possible handshapes of IUR, which is similar to that found in AdaSL and is smaller than that of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). However, Schuit notes that the handshapes appear more

lax than those observed in sign languages of Deaf communities. She speculates that because IUR is only used by less than 50 deaf Inuit, all aged over 40 who are presumably first-language (L1) signers, and also used by at least twice as many hearing people who are most likely hearing second-language (L2) signers, the handshapes exhibit more laxness and IUR permits more flexible word order. The empirical question of how the demographic make-up of a signing community influences the linguistic structure of a sign language is worth exploring more, as it happens that sign languages of Deaf communities also have a large proportion of hearing L2 signers, plus a large proportion of late L1 and L2 deaf signers.

The idea of gestural influences, both non-manual and manual, from an ambient spoken language on a sign language is not novel, as this issue has been addressed in many sign languages of Deaf communities. One would be hard-pressed to deny that the lexicon of a sign language does not contain any signs that are rooted in gestural origins of the ambient spoken language(s). This has not been investigated as much for village sign languages. Le Guen's thorough investigation of the influence of time gestures from Yucatec Maya, a language spoken in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, to time signs in Yucatec Maya Sign Language (YMSL, also known as Chican Sign Language or CSL) is the first of its kind. Hearing sign-naïve Yucatec Maya speakers utilize manual gestural strategies for expressing deictic and sequential time reference. Their gestures show that they conceive time as a non-linear cycle of successive events and do not distinguish past and future but rather map both time periods on the same gestural space. Le Guen argues that deaf YMSL signers have taken up these gestural strategies and moreover have adapted them to the extent whereby some gestures evolve to signs through partial or full lexicalization and conventionalization. One interesting example is the rolling gesture that Yucatec Maya speakers produce when they refer to either the past or the future and disambiguate the meaning of the gesture by uttering a temporal adverb. Since the pairing of manual gestures and signs occurs in the same modality, some deaf and hearing YMSL signers reverse the direction of the rolling gesture backwards, instead of forward, to mark past for disambiguation. The analysis of gestures serving as a substrate for a sign language offers insight about the development of a village sign language and the role of hearing and deaf signers in its development. What would be interesting to know is whether the extent and source(s) of influence of gestures referring to time on signs is similar across all sign languages.

The need to incorporate the study of village sign languages in sign language typology is magnified by the fact that they are at risk for endangerment and/or are currently endangered due to language shift to sign languages of Deaf communities and/or even to oral-based education. All too often, we only become aware of village sign languages when they are already endangered or extinct (cf. Martha's Vineyard Sign Language; Groce 1985) and information on these languages is

scarce. Virtually every village sign language in this volume is at risk for endangerment or is already endangered, which comes with major social and linguistic consequences. To take an example, the accidental discovery of AJSL amidst a research project on Israeli Sign Language (ISL) led Lanesman & Meir to investigate this sign language that originated in a Jewish community in the Algerian city of Ghardaia and now exists mainly among deaf and hearing AJSL signers who migrated to present-day Israel and France in the 1960s. To piece together the history of AJSL and its signing community and assess the current vitality of AJSL, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with nine deaf and hearing AJSL signers, all of them aged over 50 and most of them bilingual in ISL. The dispersion of Algerian Jews from Ghardaia and the interaction with and integration into the Israeli Deaf community have led to a change in marriage patterns whereby deaf AJSL signers marry deaf ISL signers, not hearing Algerians as in the past. As a result, only ISL is transmitted to the children, and AJSL is likely to disappear within the next generation. The study of language socialization, which encompasses the study of language ideologies and practices in daily life, could provide a more detailed understanding of how AJSL and other village sign languages are prone to endangerment.

Such a study is only feasible if a researcher has the opportunity to research a village sign language in the long term. Fortunately, Nonaka's detailed account of the vitality of Ban Khor Sign Language (BKSL) of Thailand, which is endangered due to deaf signers shifting to Thai Sign Language (TSL), offers some answers. Her research is built on holistic ethnographic fieldwork over the span of 15 consecutive years and takes a language ecology approach, which examines the use of language situated in multiple dynamic and historical contexts. This approach has the advantage of allowing her to examine the constellation of factors — geographical proximity and demography, hereditary deafness, socio-economic organization, social beliefs and attitudes about deafness — that created an environment which supported the development, spread, and sustenance of BKSL. The approach also allows her to examine the causes and processes — economic, social, and demographic changes, as well as contact with TSL and the Thai Deaf community — that have contributed to the decline of BKSL. It would be all too easy to argue that contact with sign languages of Deaf communities places village sign languages at risk for endangerment, but to describe how and why that occurs is not an easy feat, which is something Nonaka has accomplished. Two take-away messages from the studies of AJSL and BKSL are worth mentioning. First, hearing people contribute to the vitality of a sign language by being the critical keepers of the language as they have no strong incentive to learn another sign language (Nonaka 2009). Second, children also contribute (or do not) to the vitality of a sign language, as they are instrumental to the use, maintenance, and transmission of the language.

Children are also the embodiment of language change, for as language learners, they are most sensitive to the input available in their environment. Kata Kolok (KK), a sign language indigenous to the village of Bengkala in Indonesia, is already changing from sustained contact with Indonesian Sign Language. These changes pose extraordinary challenges for researchers to study children's acquisition of village sign languages without the influence of another sign language. For this reason, de Vos's study of one deaf child's acquisition of the syntactic marking of perfective aspect in KK over the age span from 24 to 36 months is a rare addition to existing acquisition literature. According to a corpus of five years' worth of spontaneous and elicited adult signing in KK, the adult form of the perfective aspect is conveyed through a multi-channeled structure, namely, through the simultaneous coordination of non-manual and manual signs: a lip smack resembling the word 'pah' produced simultaneously with one or two 5-handshapes in upward palm orientation. De Vos examines whether the child's acquisition of perfective aspect marking exhibits a modality-specific generalization, based on ASL studies, according to which the acquisition of the manual form precedes the acquisition of the coordination of the non-manual and manual signs. Although time constraints do not allow de Vos to fully test this generalization, her data suggests that children acquiring KK may follow modality-specific developmental stages with regards to the coordination of manual and non-manual forms. Such findings can tell us more about the acquisition of village sign languages, which in turn, can inform us about the role of modality in the acquisition of sign languages.

Is there any reason, apart from language-specific factors, to assume that acquisition of a village sign language would be remarkably different from acquisition of a deaf community sign language? One possibility is the nature of the language transmission, namely the exposure, availability, and range of input from deaf and hearing adults. What is the typical language-learning environment of deaf children in village signing communities? We know that in Deaf communities, the majority of deaf children are born to hearing non-signing parents and usually acquire a sign language when they enter a school for the deaf or when they socialize with the Deaf community. In contrast, Deaf children of deaf native-signing parents constitute a very small percentage of the general population of Deaf communities. In many village signing communities, deaf-hearing marriages are the norm (and often the only type of marriage), and hereditary deafness typically exhibits the pattern of recessive transmission. Thus language transmission appears to occur within and between families, and both deaf and hearing adults serve as input models for deaf children. This scenario raises a few empirical questions: whether deaf children born to hearing parents who are proficient signers acquire the sign language on the same timetable as deaf children born to deaf parents; whether child-directed sign from hearing parents is qualitatively and quantitatively the same as that of

deaf parents; and what the role of hearing signing children and the extent of their role is in the development of a sign language.

One can get an idea of what the language-learning environment of deaf children in a village signing community is like from Kisch's essay on the signing community of Al-Sayyid Bedouin in the Negev desert of southern Israel. This essay presents a case study for identifying generations of signers of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL). Her empirical observations of signing as a practice that is shared by both deaf and hearing members of the community is based on more than a decade and half's worth of anthropological fieldwork that includes working with the first generation of deaf signers in Al-Sayyid. She argues that the shared practice of signing in a community means that deaf and hearing children of signers are exposed to sign from birth and receive input from deaf and hearing adults as well as from one another. According to her findings, less than half of deaf signers of second and third generations grew up in homes with older deaf siblings and/or a deaf parent, which means that it was more common for a deaf signer of either said generation to acquire ABSL from people other than her/his parents. Kisch also argues that the input children receive depends on who they interact with, which does not necessarily mean signers should be only grouped by kinship, or structural generation, i.e. a group of descendants with the same distance from an ancestor. Rather, signers can also be grouped by social networks which can be characterized by multiple factors such as age and schooling. For example, 120 out of 134 deaf Al-Sayyid signers have had some form of schooling, and they can be grouped in sociolinguistic generations or cohorts based on their schooling experiences: exposure to the language(s) used for classroom instruction (such as ISL, signed Hebrew, spoken and written Hebrew, and/or Arabic) and the social network of students. The schooling experience can shape both a student's later language development — which could have implications for linguistic variation amongst ABSL signers — and her social network, namely the extent and depth of interaction with ABSL and ISL signers. The grouping of deaf ABSL signers in sociolinguistic generations, in turn, allows Kisch to demonstrate the major changes occurring in the Al-Sayyid Bedouin community and how the changes can transform, i.e. reduce, the shared practice of signing between deaf and hearing members. The approach to identifying generations of signers by interactional association can serve as an excellent guide for linguists doing research in village signing communities and has already been adopted by other researchers in this volume (e.g., Le Guen; de Vos).

An interesting point arises from Kisch's essay. She posits that what distinguishes the first generation of ABSL signers from the second generation is the absence of adult signing models for the first generation, who had to invent homesigns that served as the seeds of ABSL. Nyst, Sylla & Magassouba present a slightly different angle on the distinction between homesign and sign language in their

essay on deaf signers in Douentza and the surrounding villages in rural Mali, West Africa. In surveying the area through the method of snowball sampling, a deaf-led team of Malian signers interviewed deaf signers in different villages and observed their daily interaction patterns for a basic sociolinguistic assessment. They report considerable variation in fluency among deaf signers, where fluency refers to one's ability to express oneself and communicate with others. Based on preliminary observations, the researchers argue that a deaf signer's fluency is not strictly based on the number of deaf signers in her family and community, but can be based on hearing people with varying signing skills and their readiness to interact with deaf people, i.e. hearing people can serve as sufficient adult signing models for deaf children. The input from hearing people appears to be more common for the language-learning environments of deaf people in the survey. An in-depth analysis of the linguistic structure of the signs from the deaf signers may yet reveal more about their signing fluency, but the survey recasts the current terminology of homesign, village sign language, and Deaf community sign language such that they are more amenable to fine-tuning. The current definition of home sign is derived from the studies of gestures and signs invented by deaf children in urban, Western contexts, where they were intentionally deprived of exposure to sign language and were trained to speak and listen to spoken language (cf. Goldin-Meadow 2003). This is a worthy point that linguists can take into serious consideration when they research deaf people and sign language use in rural communities where no deaf education or Deaf community is available.

Last, but not least, some of the most valuable contributions to the volume are first-handed reflections of fieldwork practice in village communities within the context of methodologies and ethics by deaf researchers, which are extremely scarce in the general literature on personal accounts of anthropological and linguistic fieldwork. Kusters' essay details her experiences of conducting ethnographic research in Adamorobe, a village in south Ghana in West Africa, from the perspective of a self-identified deaf white anthropologist. Her essay conveys a high level of consciousness about her privileged status as an educated, deaf, and white researcher. Dikyuva, Escobedo Delgado, Panda & Zeshan's essay is a recount of an academic dialogue between three deaf fieldwork researchers chronicling their experiences working in village communities in their respective home countries and dealing with ethical practice and community engagement issues. Dikyuva works on Mardin Sign Language (MarSL) in southeastern Turkey, Escobedo Delgado on Chican Sign Language (also known as Yucatec Maya Sign Language) in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and Panda on Alipur Sign Language in south India.

What links the two essays are several common themes. First, they describe their experiences of the challenging process of initiating research and obtaining genuine informed consent for data collection and publication from participants.

Informed consent assumes a highly sophisticated understanding and background knowledge of research, which is not necessarily the case in many rural speech and signing communities. Second, informed consent is based on the decision of individual participants, which is rooted in Western notions of individuality. The researchers therefore treated informed consent as a constantly ongoing process in which they evaluated their participants' responses to the research situation over time. Each researcher took a different approach to communicate their intent and to obtain individual and/or collective consent, which sometimes ran counter to institutional requirements for obtaining consent. Third, the researchers meditated on the effects of their presence and status on the communities and the research process. Kusters argued that a researcher's hearing status can shape her experience of conducting fieldwork in a village signing community as well as her interpretations of that community's perspective and attitudes toward deaf people and sign language. It appears that the value of deaf-led research is the contribution of deaf researchers' insights to the literature, and moreover, if coupled with hearing researchers' insights, we can gain a more comprehensive and complex understanding of rural signing communities. Finally, almost all of the deaf researchers discuss their experiences of collaborating with a local hearing villager who functioned as a research assistant and as an interpreter. Dikyuva mentions working with deaf MarSL signers on the documentation of MarSL, but he does not specify the exact role and extent of their involvement. Future discussion could explore how deaf signers, along with their hearing co-signers, can actively participate more in research, such as playing a larger role in language documentation projects, which could be more community-driven and useful for possible language preservation and revitalization.

Notwithstanding the fields of anthropology and linguistics differing in methodologies, especially with regards to fieldwork, the book's union of anthropologists and linguists creates a new space within the intellectual community where all can equally learn from one another. This space can prompt more researchers working in rural signing communities to exchange and share information about their field methods, to initiate cross-disciplinary collaboration, and to bring village sign languages to the forefront of mainstream academic discourse. Even more importantly, researchers can work towards making advances in linguistic typology when they implement comparable methodologies of data collection, annotation, and analysis in their fieldwork, thus allowing them to make more robust, universal and modality-specific generalizations about sign languages in the future.

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