

South African signers come in many different forms

Myriam Vermeerbergen

Lessius University College, Antwerp - Belgium

Not all users of a specific language show the same level of language competence. This is probably true for all language communities and for all languages but it is even more true in the case of signed languages. Across the world, 90 to 95 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents and it is very unlikely that these parents know the local signed language. Most often deaf children only start acquiring a signed language when they start going to a deaf school. This may be early in life, but it may also be (very) late or even never, either because the deaf child's parents opt for a strictly oral education with no contact with a signed language or because the child does not go to school at all. In the latter case, especially when there is no contact with adult signers, the deaf child and one or more of its hearing relatives may create a "home sign system" (Goldin-Meadow, 2003) to be used for communication amongst themselves. Such home sign systems may undergo diachronic ontogenetic evolution and become what has been called "Emerging Sign Languages" (Fusellier-Souza, 2006).

This presentation will present and discuss different forms of signing as they appear in South Africa. Starting from Cuxac's semiogenetic model (Cuxac, 2000) it will be explored whether and how these various kinds of gestural communication systems can be (structurally and functionally) related to one another. Furthermore, I will show the relevance of research on all different forms of signing currently in use in South Africa (and elsewhere) to the field of