Linguistic Ethnography and Sign Language Studies

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE introduces the approach of "linguistic ethnography" (LE) in sign language studies. While this term has been adopted by only a handful of sign language researchers in the past few years, LE has existed as a named emerging field for at least twenty years in the United Kingdom and Europe. A number of sign language researchers have done work that we see as falling under the term *linguistic ethnography* (LE) even when they have not classified their work as such. This introduction for the special issue gives a quick overview of what LE means, how it has emerged as a field, and what kind of sign language research work classifies as LE. In the last part, we also introduce the five articles featured in this special issue and discuss how they fit in the development of LE as a field.

What Is LE?

> *Linguistic ethnography links the micro to the macro, the small to the large, the varied to the routine, the individual to the social, the creative to the constraining, and the historical to the present and to the future.* (Copland and Creese 2015, 26)

LE focuses on the study of language use in everyday contexts by combining ethnography and linguistics. A key tenet in linguistics is to produce generalizations about language structures and patterns, and in many branches of linguistics, the formal properties of languages are treated independently of their use and meaning in context. Ethnographers, however, focus on the creation of meaning through language

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as used in context, aiming attention at particularity and contingency; their accounts typically contain vignettes, narratives, and analysis of particular real-life situations or interactions. This does not mean that ethnographers do not look for structures or patterns, but rather their approach allows for contingency and context-dependency to come to the fore (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2015).

Participant observation is a method central to ethnography. Other methods that are combined with participant observation can vary rather widely, ranging from interviews to surveys, linguistic elicitation, and so on. The methodological flexibility of ethnography allows for carefully designing methodologies that are suitable to particular contexts. In ethnography, the researcher's own social, linguistic, and interpretive capacities are crucial in establishing rapport with participants and in making sense of situations, and the researcher's process of adjusting to different practices and contexts in itself can be consequential for the analysis (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2015).

How are linguistics and ethnography woven into LE, then? In Rampton's repeatedly cited words, LE entails "opening up linguistics" and "tying down ethnography" (Rampton 2007). Ethnography opens up linguistics in that it focuses on these context-based processes, Rampton argues, "contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically" (Rampton 2007, 585). Linguistics ties down ethnography, then, in that it pushes toward the close analysis of delineated processes, often based on audio- or videorecorded data, employing sociolinguistic traditions such as conversation analysis and as such drawing attention to the smallest moves and details in utterances and interactions.

Thus linguistics and ethnography are complementary: ethnography can prevent linguistics from being reductive and reductionist "by embedding it in rich descriptions of how the users of a given variety adapt their language to different situational purposes and contexts" (Rampton 2007, 596). Linguistics, in its turn, can help to produce more subtle and detailed ethnographic descriptions and analyses of language use. LE approaches also have led to linguistic ethnographers

challenging, problematizing, or deconstructing essentializations and generalizations in linguistic theories by noticing what gets left out or by noticing that linguistic theories and classifications do not fit the patterns and particularities of everyday language use (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2015). Indeed, scholars working in LE are generally sensitive to the "risks of stereotyping" (Rampton 2007, 591) and avoid reducing or simplifying their ethnographic accounts to fit existing essentalizations and generalizations.

LE's Context of Emergence?

LE makes extensive use of the theoretical and methodological apparatus of linguistic anthropology. Linguistic anthropology, while institutionalized in North America, has not been properly institutionalized within British anthropology; hence, there was a hiatus that led to the emergence of LE. LE is a new interdisciplinary field that has developed within the United Kingdom in interactions between European and British scholars of different scholarly traditions who were interested in the use and meaning of language in its social contexts and who combined linguistics and ethnography in their approaches. These scholars have turned to annual conferences of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL), which provided the space and context for them to interact (Rampton 2007; Shaw, Copland, and Snell 2015). A group of these scholars co-established the Linguistic Ethnography Forum (LEF; www.lingethnog.org) in 2001, which united ethnographers who focus on Interactional Sociolinguistics, New Literacy Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis and other traditions that "treated the interface between language/text and situation/context as a central problem" (Rampton 2007, 589). LEF was the first of thirteen BAAL Special Interest Groups, and BAAL hosts a LEF stream at its annual conference. LEF hosts an active listserv and established a biennial conference series, "Explorations in Ethnography, Language, and Communication," which started in 2008. Some of the key members have published edited volumes (Copland and Creese 2015; Shaw, Copland, and Snell 2015) as well as a handbook on LE (Tusting 2020).

While LE was born under the institutional umbrella of applied linguistics, not all applied linguistics research is ethnographic, nor does LE entirely fall under applied linguistics. LE is a truly interdisciplinary

field that appeals to scholars in education, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, medicine, and so on. This is one of the ways in which LE differs from North American linguistic anthropology. The field has therefore been called a "discursive space" (Rampton 2007), an umbrella-like "area of shared interests" (Shaw, Copland, and Snell 2015), or "a community of scholars who share particular theoretical and methodological orientations toward researching language in social life" (Tusting 2020, 1). Like applied linguistics, LE often takes "real-world problems" as its starting point, and its findings often have impact beyond academia (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2015). LE studies are often topic-oriented, which means linguistic ethnographers generally do not set out to constitute a comprehensive description of a community (as is the case in traditional anthropology, for example), but focus on specific contexts or specific types of interactions such as teaching, medical consults, and literacy events.

Sign language researchers have not been extensively represented yet within this network. By way of exception, one of the editors of this special issue (Annelies Kusters) has participated in LEF since 2013. However, there are a number of sign language researchers whose approach, according to us, fits within the category "linguistic ethnography" even though they have not aligned themselves with this growing group of researchers. Some of these sign language researchers identify as (linguistic) anthropologists, others as linguists, and yet others as applied linguistics scholars, although most of them do (also) identify as interdisciplinary scholars. Thus, the term *linguistic ethnography* in the next section, and in the articles of this special issue, refers to the shared approach rather than to the specific group of scholars who are active in LEF in Europe and the UK. We see this special issue on LE of sign languages as an opportunity to cohere a network of sign language researchers who utilize LE in their research regardless of their backgrounds.

Linguistic Ethnography and Sign Languages

Researchers conducting LE on sign languages come from a variety of backgrounds, spanning sociocultural and linguistic anthropology, education, applied and theoretical linguistics, and sociolinguistics. Fieldwork is often aimed at documenting and/or describing sign lan-

guages (Nyst 2015), but researchers also have focused on sign language emergence, language learning and socialization, language choices, and language ideologies. Elsewhere, we discuss examples of LE works that are products of longitudinal fieldwork in which researchers know or learn the sign language(s) they are investigating (or the other signed practices that are investigated), do participant observation, and interact with people in this language on an informal basis (Hou and Kusters 2020). Some of these researchers also engage in linguistic elicitation tasks. Videorecording interactions is essential to many of these works. To annotate and analyze sign language data, many researchers have worked with ELAN, a linguistic annotation tool that enables them to create text annotations to audio and video files on different tiers (Crasborn, Sloetjes, Auer, and Wittenburg 2006).

The contemporary research of sign languages through the interpretive approach of LE has enriched and enhanced our understanding of sign languages in the following respects. LE has challenged existing classifications of sign languages and foregrounded the complexity of signed practices in various social contexts and in relation to the processes of language socialization, emergence, and endangerment. It also has given us insight into how language practices and language ideologies inform each other. More importantly, LE has enabled a new generation of researchers to elevate the study of sign languages to an unprecedented research paradigm by investigating signed communication as situated within local language practices and ideologies through various epistemological frameworks (Hou and Kusters 2020). Below, we discuss some specific themes in sign language LE in relation to the articles that appear in this special issue.

Some scholars have situated different manual communications on a developmental cline that would roughly look like this (loosely based on critical literature reviews by Green 2014 and Hou 2016):

• homesign—communal/rural/family homesign
• village/indigenous/rural/shared sign language
• national/urban sign language.

Figure 1 is a visualization of these manual communications. Other authors have distinguished more granular categories or stages. From the perspective of psycholinguists and linguists, there usually is, at
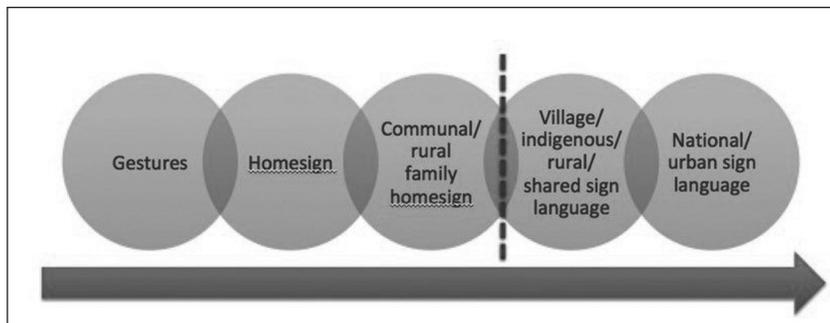
FIGURE 1. A visualization of different forms of signing arranged on a developmental cline.

some point, the construction of an ideological break between sign and/or gesture as "system" and "sign *language*," as indicated by the dashed line in figure 1. These classifications have been challenged by linguistic ethnographers who looked at how different forms of signing are produced in different linguistic ecologies (e.g., Green 2014; Hou 2016; Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018; Nyst et al. 2012).

In this issue, Goico, Horton, and Hou draw from ethnographic fieldwork on the lives of deaf children and their interactants in Peru, Guatemala, and Mexico, to situate their communication in the sociocultural context of their daily lives. None of these children have access to an existing sign language, and they use what psycholinguists would call "homesigns" without serious consideration for the diverse language ecologies that the children inhabit. Working within LE, the authors find that the signing practices of the children do not neatly fit into the existing classifications of manual communication systems. In her article, Goico abstracts away from looking at the structure of "homesigns" to examining the use of what she calls "Iquitos local signs" as social action. She presents a microanalysis of a spontaneous interaction between one young deaf boy, Luis, and his neighbor, Pamela, in a bingo game. The microanalysis underscores Luis's strategic deployment of multiple semiotic resources that are not limited to manual signs, but that also encompass vocalizations, bodily actions, and conventional gestures that are widely used in the local hearing

society. He also uses objects in the material environment to communicate with Pamela and to achieve social aims. Goico also observes Pamela's skillful interpretation of his semiotic resources. The adoption of the name "Iquitos local signs" spotlights the signing practices of the deaf youth, which clearly extend beyond the limits of their families in residence and also distinguishes from homesigners that have been extensively studied for the structure of their signs but whose social worlds remain unexplored.

In a similar vein, Horton shows how the larger communicative ecology of Nebaj, a town in the highlands of rural Guatemala, differs from that in the United States for deaf children. Intergenerational deafness is present in several families, and hearing people are accustomed to communicating with deaf people through gestures in recurring encounters. She opts to use the term *homesign* with the clarified understanding that it patterns to what Nyst et al. (2012) and Green (2014) call *rural homesigns* and *natural sign,* respectively. Horton's usage of the term expands scholarly understanding of the diversity of the social circumstances in which language emerges and operates among deaf and hearing interactants. This is evidenced by her article's focus on the use of a local genre known as "price-checking" between a deaf adult signer, Lucia, and her hearing acquaintance, Marta, with Lucia's child, Sara, overseeing their conversation. The price-checking is a highly familiar script that is accessible to both deaf signers and their hearing interactants based on their experiences of social interactions in retail contexts. Lucia capitalizes on this script to engage Marta in conversation, giving Sara a visual demonstration of one strategy for communicating with a non-signing hearing person.

Linguistic ethnographers also study emerging sign languages to understand how language emerges through spontaneous interactions of deaf, deaf-blind, and hearing people over time in their everyday lives, and they consider emic perspectives of such language practices without adhering a priori to scholarly categories of manual communication (e.g., Kisch 2012; Lanesman and Meir 2012; Nonaka 2009). There is a greater emphasis on the signers and what and how they use their language(s) and think about them than on the structure of the languages itself; this field of inquiry is sign language ideologies

as they relate to language practices (Kusters, Green, Moriarty, and Snoddon 2020).

In her article, Hou utilizes repeated, long-term LE to investigate local, vernacular sign language ideologies as they relate to sign language development in deaf and hearing children. She presents a case study of one family that has invented its own manual communication system known as "making hands" in the San Juan Quiahije municipality of Oaxaca, Mexico. The deaf caregiver, Regina, assesses deaf and hearing children's signing competence based on their age and audiological status. She judges her younger deaf sister Angelica to be a novice signer whose language development trajectory is fixed to mature on its own. In contrast, she judges her hearing daughter Martha to be a nonsigner. Over time, Regina adjusts her assessment to assert that both girls are competent signers, in which Martha becomes one through her socialization as an interpreter for the family. Hou taps into extended participant observations, interviews, and interactions among the family *and* the researcher, with a particular focus on an unfamiliar conversational script that Hou requested from Regina and the girls. This research process highlights how studying local language ideologies is more meaningful when the researcher's positionality is made explicit for its role in the process.

Deaf people's language lives are plural in terms of their use of sign, spoken, and written languages, and even other semiotic resources (Adam 2012; Kisch 2008; Kusters 2017; Kusters, Spotti, Swanwick, and Tapio 2017). Language contact, thus, is the norm in the language ecologies of deaf people. In many parts of the world, sign languages exist in a multilingual society where deaf people encounter different spoken languages at home, school, and other places. Many deaf people thus know how to speak and/or write one or more spoken languages and/or one or more sign languages. Increased mobility allows deaf people to learn other sign languages or communicate in International Sign—which has emerged in the contact between deaf users of different sign languages (Moody 2002)—and to learn new sign languages.

Deaf signers not only live among many languages, but also negotiate them in different modalities (Kusters 2017; Kusters, Spotti, Swanwick, and Tapio 2017). Many recent studies focus on how signers deploy an array of semiotic resources from multiple languages,

which represents language contact within and across communication modalities. Videorecording such interactions in natural settings is crucial in order to be able to closely study them. In her article in this issue, Moriarty discusses the process of videorecording deaf signers' interactions with a variety of interlocutors in the context of creating an ethnographic film about deaf tourism in Bali. Producing LE films enables ethnographers to not only study interactions closely by dissecting the video material but also to disseminate what "real" everyday interactions look like. Moriarty spent seven months researching deaf tourism in Bali. For six weeks toward the end of the fieldwork, Moriarty worked with two professional deaf cameramen to record interactions among deaf tourists and two deaf tour guides in a tour group with deaf people from various countries. They also recorded visits to a Balinese village with a high number of deaf residents that is frequented by tourists. Moriarty discusses how the process of creating an LE film in this context allows her to study the different ways deaf people's linguistics resources come together and the ways that deaf people deploy these resources, often in a cooperative way, to achieve understanding when their linguistic backgrounds are very different from their interlocutor's.

LE thus helps to identify and to carefully analyze deaf people's everyday linguistic strategies. LE also makes it possible to show close-ups of what happens when these strategies are not responded to or recognized. Weber and Snoddon's article in this issue explores ways in which participants develop linguistic repertoires through the production of a play involving eight deaf youth actors supported by a production team. The play was created to present the stories of deaf youth during their journey to a new deaf community in a midwestern Canadian city. The authors did LE during the rehearsals for the play and analyze examples of how the knowledge of a young migrant deaf woman called Chanda goes unrecognized and is suppressed by both nondeaf and deaf people. By doing this, the authors focus on the problem that deaf people and their language practices and linguistic repertoires are often rendered invisible, and they argue that LE can lay these processes bare.

The five articles in this special issue thus exemplify how contemporary research on sign languages through the lens of LE enriches

and enhances our understanding in the following respects. LE has shown how language learning and socialization of deaf children and adults as signers occur (or do not occur). LE has challenged existing classifications of sign languages and foregrounded the complexity of signed practices in various social contexts and in relation to language socialization processes and multilingual settings. LE enables sign language researchers to elevate sign language studies to an unprecedented research paradigm by investigating language situated in local language practices through various epistemological frameworks.

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