

Kata Kolok, a village-based sign language of Northern Bali

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The demonstration that signed languages have grammars too, is one of the great achievements of the last 50 years of linguistic research (Stokoe, 1960). Moreover, research has shown that there are strong commonalities between signed and spoken languages in their structures, acquisition, and processing (see for example the papers in Meier, Cormier, and Quinto-Pozos (2002)). In order to investigate the true linguistic diversity of the world's languages, and possible modality effects on language structure, languages from the visual-gestural modality must be included as well.

The present study thus investigates a small, village-based sign language named Kata Kolok. Although there are only fifty deaf people, the signed language is, to varying degrees, used by more than two thirds of the approximately 2,000 hearing villagers (Branson, Miller, & Marsaja, 1996, 1999; Marsaja, forthcoming). This sociolinguistic situation differs from deaf communities in urban societies in which the sign language is a minority language used mostly by deaf, their children, and interpreters. The situation in Desa Kolok thus provides us with an interesting language contact situation between languages from two different modalities. Due to the widespread use of signing in the village, deaf in Desa Kolok, in contrast to deaf in urban societies, are not regarded as inferior in areas of marriage, mental ability, occupations, and social integration (Marsaja, forthcoming). There are less than a dozen known villages in the world in which such an indigenous sign language has evolved in a predominantly hearing community.

Besides these special sociolinguistic properties, research on Kata Kolok has shown some typologically rare features compared to other sign languages. For example, it seems to lack the abstract use of space found, for instance, in American Sign Language. Instead it uses pointing to real-world locations in the village to express possession, location, and existence (Perniss & Zeshan, forthcoming). The Kata Kolok system was presumably influenced by hearing signers who use Balinese, which has a cardinal direction system. In the system that Western Europeans use to express spatial relations for short distances, directions are normally expressed relative to the speaker's body, i.e. left or right, or are related to the intrinsic properties of the objects. This contrasts with the directions in Balinese who rather express spatial relations based on real-world directions related to the location of the sea and mountains in Bali (Adelaar, 1997). Presumably, it is the use of such an absolute spatial reference system (Levinson, 2003) that has influenced Kata Kolok. The way in which form and meaning relate in Kata Kolok pointing, however, raises the question to what extent the system may be called linguistic.

After the set-up of a field station with a local assistant, who is a native signer, a large corpus of data will be collected and processed at the site over the course of the three-year project. The corpus will include elicited and spontaneous data from different genders and age-groups as well as child-signing and child-directed signing. Data are transcribed on the spot, using ELAN video annotation software. In parallel to the research project, a social service program will be set up in order to teach the deaf basic literacy and numeracy. This program is set up partly to promote the use of the local sign language for education, as it is threatened by the dominant sign language of Indonesia: Indonesian Sign Language, used in government institutions for the deaf.

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