American Indian Sign Language
Documentation and Revitalization Project

Jeffrey Davis, Ph.D.
Professor of Sign Language, Linguistics, and Interpretation, The University of Tennessee

Recent Publications:

Great Plains Cultural Areas
### Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL)
**Documentary Linguistic fieldwork**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Northern Cheyenne [Tse’tsehestahese]; <em>Algonguian language family</em>; and, <em>Siouan language groups</em> like the Assiniboine [A’aniinen], Nakoda/Lakȟóta [Tetonwan], and Mandan-Hidasta [Moennitarri]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Crow [Apsaalooke/Siouan language family]; N. Cheyenne [Tse’tsehestahese/Algonguian language family]; and, Blackfeet [Aamsskáápikani/Algonguian language family]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>International Conference (NSF-funded) to film signers from among the Crow [Apsaalooke], N. Cheyenne [Tse’tsehestahese], and from four tribes of the Blackfeet/Blackfoot Nation [Niitsítapi]: most notably, the Káínaa [Blood], Aapátohsipikáni [N. Piegan], and Aamsskáápikani [S. Piegan or Montana Blackfeet], and Siksiká [Alberta, Canada Blackfoot]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing a Corpus of Legacy and Contemporary Linguistic Documentary Materials

Research website: http://pislresearch.com/

I take responsibility for the material represented here and acknowledge grant support from the National Science Foundation’s Documenting Endangered Languages (NSF-NEH-DEL) Program, Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences (BCS-1110211, 1160604, and FN-50127).
Traditional Domains of Use

• Intertribal communication
• Storytelling
• Rituals/speaking or non-speaking
• Distance communication
• Communication during raids & wars
• Hunting and trading
• Deaf family members (womb/tomb)
Contemporary Domains of PISL Use

- Signing Prayers
- Storytelling
- Language Immersion/TPR
- Performances/Entertainment
- Native American Church
- Sawmill Industry
- Deaf Family Members
Current sociolinguistic status

PISL is an endangered language, kept alive over the past several generations primarily by:

- tribal elders, who maintain the language by using it with their children and grandchildren
- deaf tribal members, who have found it a fluent means of communication within their native communities

Documentation and research studies of varieties and dialects are underway.
Preliminary linguistic findings

• PISL morpho-syntactic processes are highly productive—generating distinct lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) compounds, polysemous forms, classifier predicates, and lexicon composed of indicating, depicting, and pointing signs common among signed languages

• At least one thousand core PISL lexicon items encompassing all lexical categories (questions, negation, pronouns, etc.)

• Rich use of idioms and metaphors
• PISL is typologically similar to other signed languages—characterized by certain spatial-grammatical features, verb inflections, and classifier-like constructions

• Comparisons of one thousand signs (1800s – 2000s) resulted in an 80 – 90 percent range of lexical similarity between historical and contemporary PISL varieties

• PISL and ASL lexical similarity in the 50 percent range, which suggests these are not genetically related; however, language contact and lexical borrowing likely occurred
**Metalinguistic awareness**: typically, deaf and hearing family members maintain & recognize linguistic boundaries between different varieties and ways of signing, including ways of naming; e.g., name signs for family members (present or absent)

**Interpretation/code-switching/simultaneous communication**
between the spoken and signed languages (depending on the hearing status and sociolinguistic background of the participant)

The use of sign language spans a range of topics and settings, past and present time periods, and conversations about daily routines (e.g., arts and crafts to farming and herding)

**Further Reading:**
Significantly, indigenous signed languages like PISL appear to be much more complex linguistically than home sign systems.

For example, signing space for home sign is larger; signs and sign sequences tend to be repeated; the number of distinct handshapes are fewer; eye gaze functions differently; signs are produced more slowly and less fluently; and home sign systems are more environmentally dependent (e.g., requiring the signer to point to a color or object in the environment rather than make a sign for them). Home sign systems are typically used by one deaf individual. Well documented case in Nicaragua (LSN). What happens when the home sign system is learned natively and cross-generationally?
# Comparing Natural Sign Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DCSL</th>
<th>PISL</th>
<th>AASL</th>
<th>Diné</th>
<th>ABSL</th>
<th>LSN</th>
<th>Home Sign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventionalized</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-generational</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status and Spread</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>