Rating the vitality of sign languages

J. Albert Bickford, M. Paul Lewis, Gary Simons
SIL International

3rd International Conference on Language Documentation and conservation
University of Hawaii
3 March 2013
Expanded GIDS (EGIDS)

- Lewis and Simons 2010, based on:
  - Fishman 1991: Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)
  - Brenzinger et al. 2010: UNESCO language vitality categories
  - Language status categories in Ethnologue 16
- EGIDS was developed to provide ratings of vitality/endangerment in Ethnologue for all languages of the world.
- Based originally only on spoken languages
What about sign languages?

- Immediate issue:
  - Can EGIDS be easily adapted for sign languages?
  - Is vitality for the two modalities comparable?

- Broader issues:
  - What similarities and differences exist between the sociolinguistic situations of signed and spoken languages in patterns of vitality, development, loss, and revitalization?
  - How robust or fragile are sign languages?
EGIDS design

- Cf. Simons & Lewis presentation (this conference)
- Elements:
  - Each level has a number, label, & description
  - Separate application guidelines
- Level 6a “Vigorous Use” is the “normal” state of a language (default value)
- Two most important factors for determining levels:
  - Institutional support (levels above 6a)
  - Intergenerational transmission (levels 6a and below)
Obvious ratings of certain SLs

- Level 3 (Wider Communication): NAISL in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century
- Level 6a (Vigorous): Many sign languages
- Level 8a (Moribund): NAISL now
- Level 10 (Extinct): Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language

But, classification of others is not so obvious, and required significant adjustments in definitions.
Problematic wordings

- “Speakers” (levels 8a, 8b)
  - “Users” instead (also in level 6b)
- “Oral”
  - “face-to-face” instead (levels 6a, 6b)
  - “vigorous use” instead (level 5)
Intergenerational transmission

- “...(parents) transmitting it to their children” (levels 6b, 7)
- Sign languages are learned mostly outside the home, not from parents, but entirely from peers
  - Schools
  - Deaf associations
- Key factor: whether children are learning it, not who they are learning it from
Role of literacy

- Literacy and writing were used to define levels 4 and 5:
  - Level 4 (Educational): “Literacy in the language…”
  - Level 5 (Written): “…used in written form in parts of the community”

- Problem:
  - No sign language has widespread use in written form
  - Some sign languages do have strong support from educational systems
    - e.g. Swedish Sign Language, Bagga-Gupta 1999, appears to be level 4
Literacy is not the key factor

- What is distinctive in levels 4 and 5?
  - Institutional support for transmission to children
  - Published literature (not necessarily written)
  - Standardization
Literacy is not the key factor

- Spoken languages use writing to do these things
- Sign languages accomplish them in other ways
  - Dictionaries and instructional materials (video, photos, line drawings)
  - Mass media
  - Published literature (video, traveling public performers)
  - Interpreter-training programs and professional interpreters
  - Institutions of higher-education for the deaf
Distinguishing levels 4 and 5

• Guideline for rating a sign language at level 4:
  • Most or all deaf education uses...
    • a natural sign language (not a manual code)
    • as a primary language of the classroom (all participants)
    • by teachers fluent in the language
• Level 5 (Developing) is an intermediate, transitional stage between 6a and 4.
  • Some elements of level 4, but not all, or not widespread
  • E.g. ASL and many other national sign languages
Host population loss

- Sign languages depend on the existence of deaf people
- When deafness disappears, so does the sign language
  - Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (Groce 1985)
  - Adamorobe Sign Language (Ghana, Kusters 2012)
Host population loss

• As the deaf population decreases, the language should be rated at 6b, not 6a, even though any deaf children who exist are still learning the language.

• Population loss can also be a threat to spoken languages: disease, warfare, tsunamis, or even just migration

• Reworded 6b: the language “is losing users”
  • Language shift: not all children learning the language
  • Population loss: fewer children to learn it
Role of interpreters

- In some countries, interpreters are legally required for functions such as those described in levels 1-4.
- This, however, does not mean the language functions at those levels.
  - In the U.S., interpreters are federally-mandated in courts for all languages of the world, but that does not make them all at level 1.
  - Mainstreamed, interpreted education does not provide the same level of support to a language that natural use of a language in a classroom does.
- Interpreters are relevant only at level 5.
Wider communication (level 3)

- Paradigm examples:
  - 19th century NAISL: use predominantly by hearing
  - ASL as a world language
- What doesn’t count as level 3?
  - Use by small numbers of hearing people associated with a national deaf community
  - Village sign languages
- NB: Ethnologue rates language vitality within each country
  - ASL is level 5 in the U.S. (although level 3 worldwide)
Robustness vs. fragility

- How resistant are sign languages to language shift/loss?
- Hypotheses based on anecdotal evidence:
  - More resistant in the face of encroachment by dominant spoken languages
  - Fragile in the face of encroachment by dominant sign languages (e.g. village vs. national sign languages)
Summary

- Comparing the sociolinguistic situation of signed and spoken languages, despite the difference, there are many elements in common.
- They can be rated together on the same vitality scale, given the right assumptions and definitions.
- Insights gained from studying sign languages illuminate our understanding of spoken languages.
Rating the vitality of sign languages
J. Albert Bickford, M. Paul Lewis, and Gary Simons
SIL International
3rd ICLDC, University of Hawaii, 3 March 2013

1. The EGIDS scale (Lewis and Simons 2010)
Based on Fishman’s (1991) GIDS, UNESCO’s language endangerment framework (Brenzinger et al. 2003), and vitality categories in Ethnologue 16 (Lewis 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Vigorous</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b</td>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a</td>
<td>Moribund</td>
<td>The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b</td>
<td>Nearly Extinct</td>
<td>The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
<td>The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Extinct</td>
<td>No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. EGIDS revised to accommodate sign languages\textsuperscript{1}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2</td>
<td></td>
<td>(no changes needed for sign languages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trade Wider Communication</td>
<td>The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Literacy in - The language is being transmitted through a system of public in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Written Developing</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community in vigorous use with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Vigorous</td>
<td>The language is used orally for face-to-face communication by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language the situation is sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b</td>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>The language is used orally for face-to-face communication by within all generations, but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children it is losing users.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to can use it the language among themselves but none are transmitting it is not being transmitted to their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a</td>
<td>Moribund</td>
<td>The only remaining active speakers users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b</td>
<td>Nearly Extinct</td>
<td>The only remaining speakers users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td></td>
<td>(no changes needed for sign languages)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{1} Some changes in Ethnologue 17 (Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2013) are noted here without comment or are omitted, as they are not relevant to the issues about sign languages presented in this paper.
3. Reasons for revisions

- Some wording was inappropriate, misleading or even offensive when applied to sign languages.
- Sign languages have a different and more complex mode of intergenerational transmission; primarily from peers rather than from parent to child.
- Widespread literacy does not exist (yet) in any sign language, yet institutional support of education and standardization does exist. These things are what provides support to a language at levels 4 and 5, not literacy per se.
- Other factors besides language shift, such as population loss from eugenic or medical practices, often threaten sign languages.

4. Other issues

- The availability of professional interpreters, even if mandated by government, does not satisfy the requirements for levels 4 and above.
- Knowledge of a sign language outside its home deaf community (whether by hearing or deaf) needs to be as widespread as spoken languages of wider communication to qualify a sign language for level 3.
- There are indications that sign languages are more resistant to replacement by spoken languages, but less resistant to replacement by other sign languages.

5. References


