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Abstract

Exploring the unexplored: Documenting and describing colour, kinship and numbers in Inuit Sign Language

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The documentation of sign languages has only recently received much attention. Documentation projects have taken place, but those have mainly focused on urban sign languages of which the researchers already had considerable background information, or at least some vocabulary items. Documenting an undescribed sign language not only has different aims, but also requires a different approach. In this presentation, I will report on some of the methodological issues and challenges I encountered while describing Inuit Sign Language (IUR). IUR is a language native to the Inuit of Canada and is used as the main means of communication by less than 40 deaf Inuit, who live spread over various communities of Nunavut territory.

Several semantic fields are documented, and the findings are compared to other sign languages, as well as to Inuktitut, the spoken language of the Inuit. The semantic fields of kinship, color, and number offer well-defined sets of words for which general patterns have been found among languages. Furthermore, they offer insights into the ways culture might influence language. As deaf Inuit have no separate culture from hearing Inuit, it was expected that patterns described for Inuktitut would be represented in IUR as well, as this has been found for some urban sign languages. However, IUR offers an interesting and contrasting example with respect to color and kinship. The numbers however, are derived from gestures used by hearing people in contrast to what has been found for some urban sign languages. IUR shows parallels with sign languages used in village communities with a high percentage of deafness.