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Abstract

With or without speech: Indigenous sign languages from Central Australia

Jennifer GREEN

University of Melbourne

Sign languages are in everyday use in many Indigenous communities in Central Australia. Signing is a form of communication used alongside other semiotic systems, including speech, gesture and drawing practices (Kendon 1984, 1988; Green 2009; Wilkins 1997a, 1997b; Green and Wilkins, forthcoming). Whereas primary sign languages operate with little or no connection to speech, these 'alternate' sign languages are used in various contexts by people who also use spoken language. They are culturally valued and highly endangered, yet until recently there has been little or no systematic documentation of these sign languages since Kendon (1988).

In everyday conversation sign is used for particular cultural and pragmatic reasons. At one end of a continuum, female bereaved kin may use hand signs to replace speech during extended periods of mourning, such as when a widow is under a speech ban. At the other end of this continuum, all members of the community may use sign to supplement other modes of communication and to replace speech when talk is not practical or desirable. Sign is used when hunting (as noise would scare off prey), when giving directions, and for communication between interlocutors who are far from each other. Sign is used as a way of demonstrating the respect required in certain cultural situations. Sign may also be employed for specific medical reasons (like aphasia) when a person has difficulty speaking, and for some speech and/or hearing impaired individuals sign is the primary mode of communication.

In this paper I will outline some of the features of the sign languages found in Arandic language speaking communities. An examination of the characteristics of these sign languages promises to increase our understanding of the diversity of sign language use in a range of urban and rural contexts. I will also discuss a recent community project established to record and develop an annotated database of sign, and a sign language website that will be accessible for Indigenous schools to use in language learning contexts (Green et al. 2011).

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