

Researching language contact

Robert Adam

Languages and Intercultural Studies

Heriot-Watt University

Language contact in sign language communities

- contact with spoken languages
- contact with other sign languages

CONTACT WITH SPOKEN LANGUAGES

Sign languages alongside a majority spoken language

- Sign languages have not always been considered full languages
- Sign languages have been seen as inferior by educators
- A small minority of deaf children are from signing families, and deaf children have limited access to fluent signers
- Deaf people have been pathologised by the medical profession and educators – deficit model

Sign languages alongside a majority spoken language

- There have been efforts to standardise sign languages – through the imposition of English-based signing vocabulary
- Education in the UK for example is largely through spoken English (CRIDE report)
- Language shaming also takes place

Historically - oralism and Milan Conference

- In line with the Enlightenment in the late 19th century philosophers and educators considered what it meant to be a human being – speech distinguished us from other living beings
- Educators in 1880 voted to stop signing and deaf teachers were forced out of the classrooms (and often into kitchens and maintenance areas, or out of schools altogether)

Repercussions

- Many schools for the deaf stopped using sign languages
- Deaf teachers were removed from the classroom and sign language no longer used as a language of instruction in many countries
- Not everywhere though: Australian schools became oral in the early 1950s with advice from British educationalists (indirect repercussion?)
- NZ sign language was banned until 1979 (when an Australasian Dictionary of Signs was introduced in schools)

Pathologisation of deafness/ Medical model of deafness

- Deaf people are seen as having a medical/pathological condition which needs treatment
- Sign language is not valued or seen as a full language (but often as a communicative option of last resort)
- Pathologisation of a group of people does not usually happen to a language group?

(Lane, 1997; Ladd 2003 among others)

In the 1990s

' I would hope that 80-90 per cent of children will be able to manage without the need to use sign language' – Sunday Herald Sun (Melbourne, Australia) 1999

The current picture:

- Deaf is diagnosed in the health system with medical professionals
 - Audiologists
 - Speech and language therapists
 - Otolaryngologists (ear, nose and throat specialists)
- Assistive technology is central to this process
 - Hearing aids
 - Cochlear implants
- Where is sign language?

Language shaming

- In schools
 - Made to sit on hands, or punished on the hands
 - Told that sign language makes them like animals – monkeys
- In public
 - Being stared at or having had sign language mimicked

Attrition of spoken heritage languages in deaf migrant communities



- Educators of deaf children have often advised parents not to speak the heritage language at home – and to speak English instead
- Deaf children from these families have also been deprived from learning sign language

CONTACT WITH SIGN LANGUAGES

Deaf Ukrainian (and Afghan, Somali, Yemeni, Iranian and Syrian) refugees

- Need to negotiate an immigration regime in the UK that is spoken and written English based and not accessible in sign languages
- There are currently no Ukrainian sign language interpreters in the UK, and so deaf Ukrainians currently residing in the UK might need to be asked to help broker communication
- WFD have information in written Ukrainian and Ukrainian Sign Language for deaf refugees
- In the long term access to health, employment and recreation will only be available in BSL through interpreters
- English classes are available for deaf immigrants
- What about deaf LGBT+ and deaf people of colour and their experiences?

An outcome of sign language contact: attrition

- Yoel (2007) found characteristics of attrition in a study of Russian Sign Language users who moved to Israel.
- Signer errors (including miscues and phonological errors) were seen as a result of language interference between Russian Sign Language and Israeli Sign Language.
- Yoel (2009) also found Maritime Sign Language in Canada (historically related to BSL) was moribund as a result of contact with American Sign Language

American Sign Language

- Has been in contact with different sign languages and in many cases supplanted them (Kusters, 2021 and others)
 - Peace corps work in Iran, India, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Taiwan and Philippines, Indonesia (Parsons, 1988)

BSL as a colonising language?

- More on this tomorrow!

Finland-Swedish sign language

- A result of Swedish colonisation of Finland,
- Deaf people from the south and western coastal areas of Finland (Hoyer, 2004) comprise of 150 signers (ethnologue.com) from a Finnish population of 5.5 million people
- Classified as 8(a) 'Moribund' on the EGDIS scale (Lewis and Simons 2010)
- Deaf people moving to Finnish Sign Language, and Finnish Swedish sign language interpreters few in number
- School in Porvoo was founded in 1846 and closed in 1993 – again demonstrates the centrality of schools in sign language vitality

Maritime Sign Language and American Sign Language

- Genetically unrelated sign languages
- Different fingerspelling systems
- MSL is a member of the BSL family, BSL is indigenous to the UK
- ASL is a member of the LSF family and was imported to North America by early white French deaf educators
- Both languages imported to Canada by early settlers/founders of first schools

(Buchanan, 2021; Yoel 2007)

Australian Irish Sign Language

- the first ISL signer, Sr Mary Gabriel Hogan, arrived in 1875 from Cabra, Ireland and established the first ISL school in Newcastle, Australia.
- after leaving school, AISL signers acquired Auslan through contacts with the Deaf community
- AISL has not been taught in schools since early 1950s and there is social pressure to use Auslan
- it used to be quite possible for AISL signers not to know any Auslan, but these people have all now died

Factors causing sign language shift

Infiltration

- school opening & dispossession of indigenous sign languages
- people moving into the same geographical location & using another language (ie ASL)

Diffusion

- school closure/discontinuing signing

- going to the local deaf club which did not use the minority sign language (AISL)
- told not to use minority language in the Deaf club (AISL)
- college educated deaf people returning from studies (ASL)
- increased prestige of one language

Migration

- moving into another geographic location and using ASL (ie university)
(Buchanan and Adam 2021)



Code switching data – Australian Irish Sign Language

So why study unimodal sign bilingualism?

Raises a number of interesting questions:

- Does it look like unimodal bilingualism (when a person can speak two spoken languages)?
- Does it look like bimodal bilingualism? (when a person knows a sign language or a spoken language)?

Background

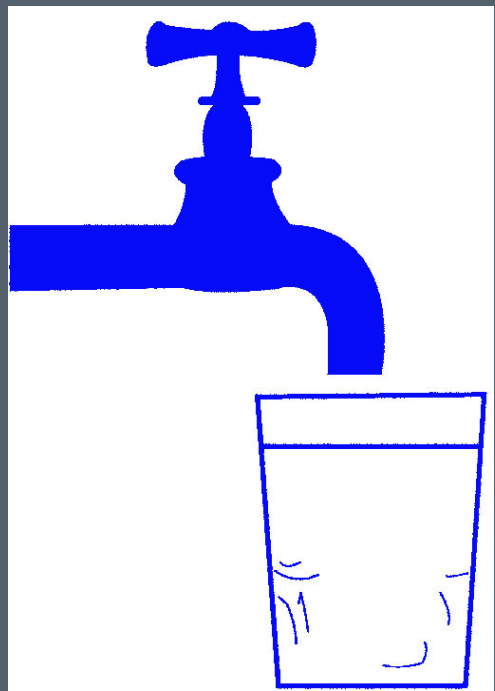
- BSL and ISL are unrelated languages in contact:
 - geographical proximity in the British Isles and Australia (Australian Sign Language and Australian Irish Sign Language).
 - Majority language (English) is the same
- This study was part of a PhD study on unimodal bilingualism in Australia and the UK:
 - sociolinguistic interviews
 - experimental data

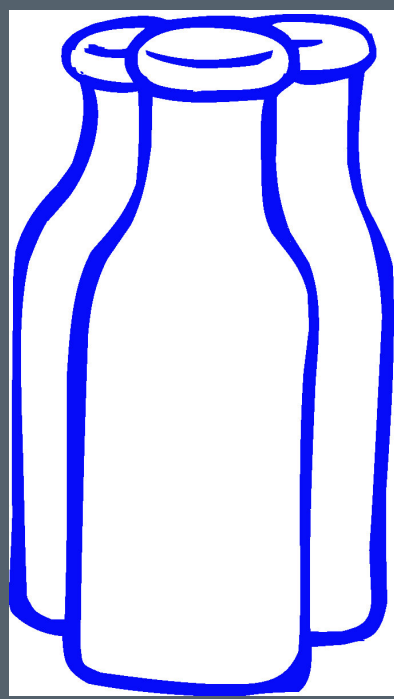
Research questions

- We wanted to know which was faster:
BSL to ISL or ISL to BSL?
- We picked people who had:
 - ISL as first language (L1) and
 - BSL as second language (L2)
- In spoken language:
 - it is quicker to go from the second language back to the first language
 - Is this the same for sign language?

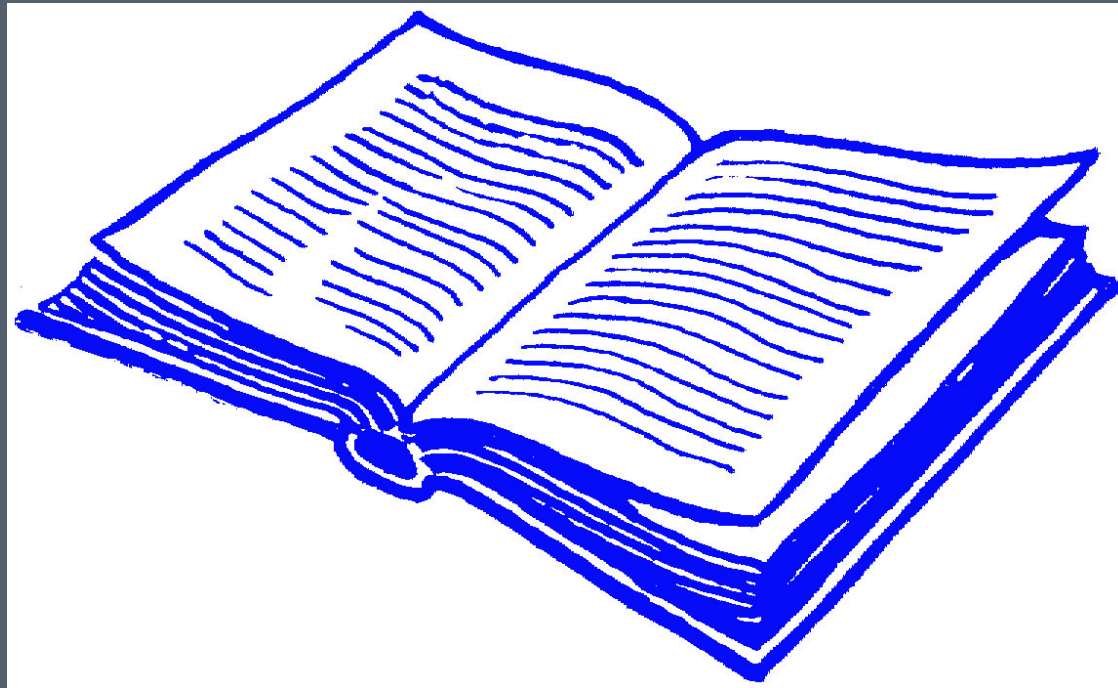
Methodology

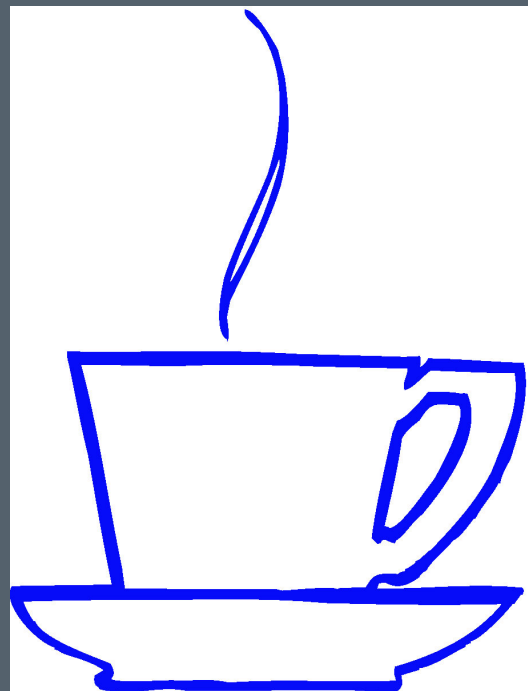
- Codeswitching task
 - Pictures of 9 items in two different colours – a total of 18 different slides
 - Half of the signs were dissimilar in the two languages
 - shared one or no parameters; MAN
 - Half were similar in the two languages
 - shared two or more parameters of handshape, location and movement; WORLD

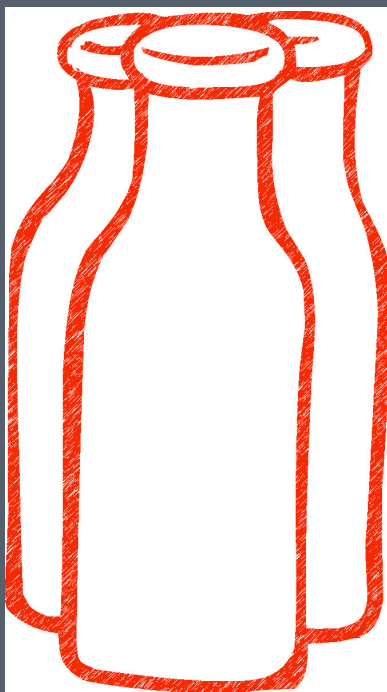


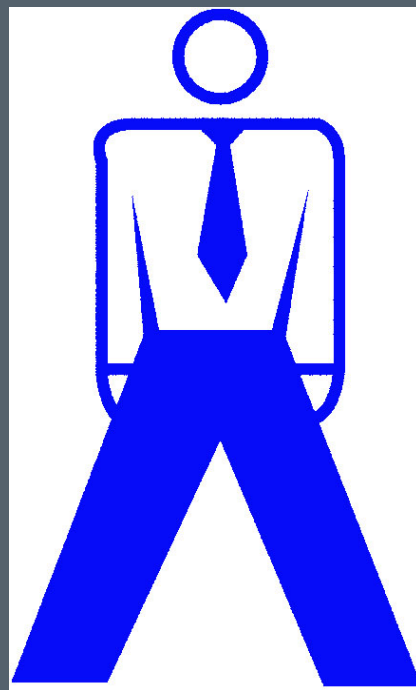


Are you ready?



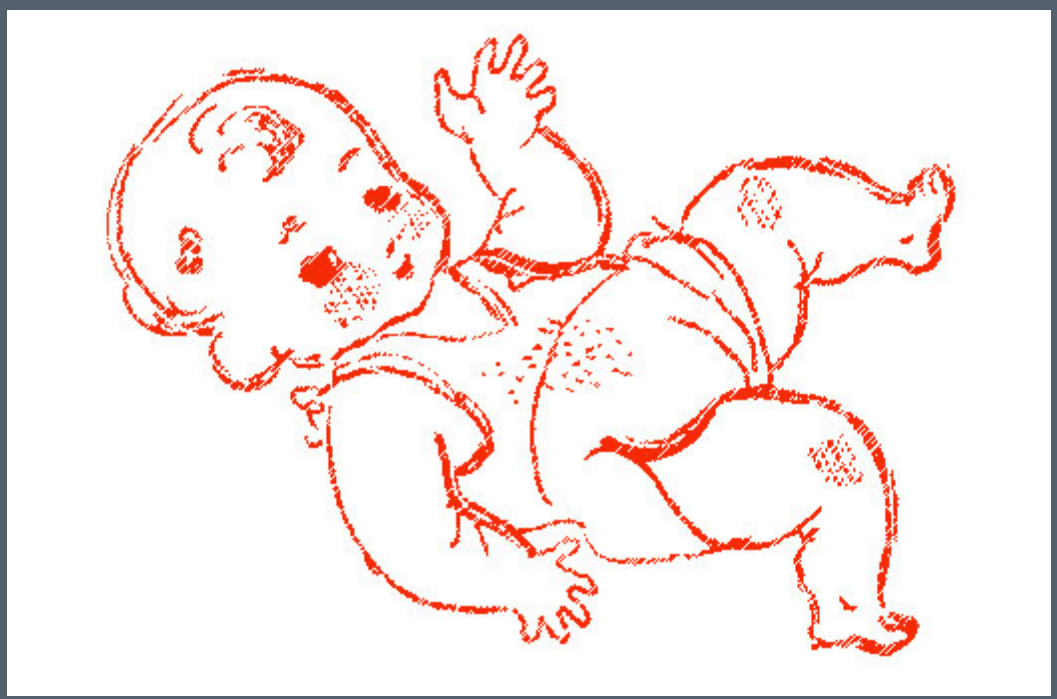






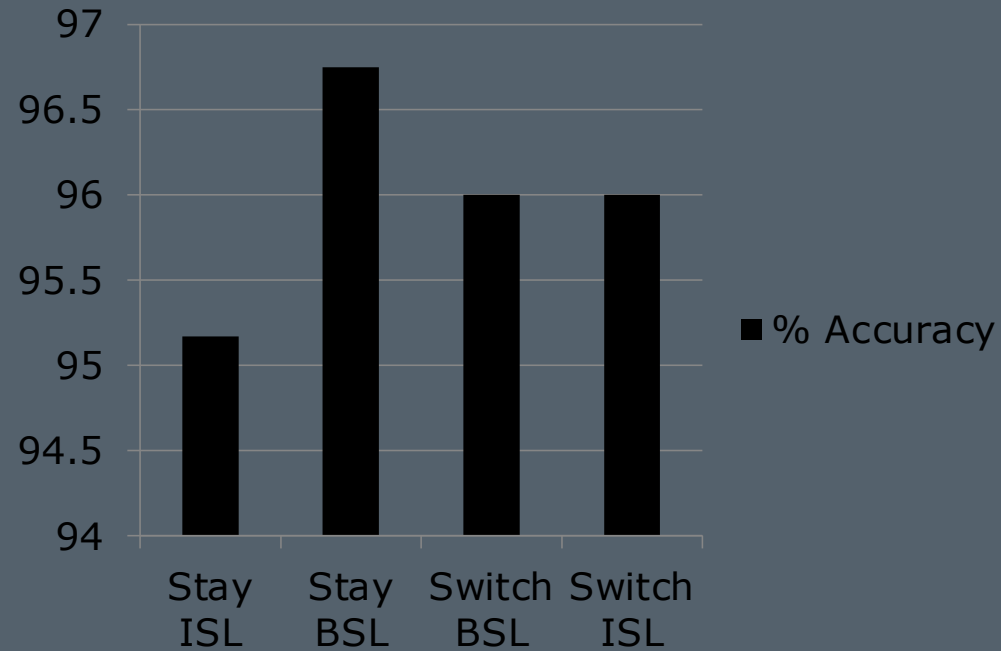




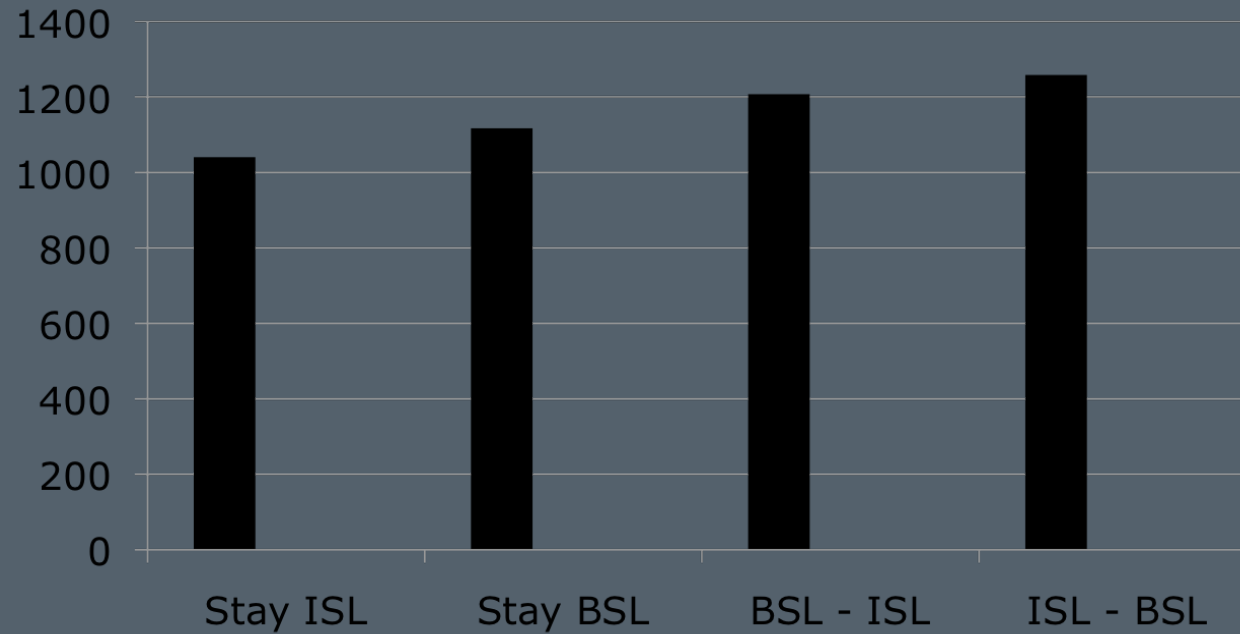


- Participants were asked to name the 18 pictures as quickly as possible.
- A total of 150 trials
 - first section of 36 trials without any switches in either ISL or BSL

Preliminary results (accuracy)



Preliminary results (RT)



What this means

- Stay trials are faster than switch trials
- Stay ISL trials are faster than stay BSL trials
- The switching cost seems to be symmetrical – spoken language research shows it is asymmetrical
- production of BSL signs takes longer than ISL signs
- Maybe switching cost is different in sign languages from spoken languages



Conversation data – Australian Irish Sign Language

Conversational data findings

The interviews revealed that minority sign language bilingualism (ie L1 in a minority language) within a sign language community had similar features as minority language bilingualism:

- some oppression from the majority language (eg attitudes, language use discouraged)
- People from the minority language group can understand the majority language, but people from the majority language group can't understand the minority language

The data demonstrates features of language contact:

Intrasentential switches

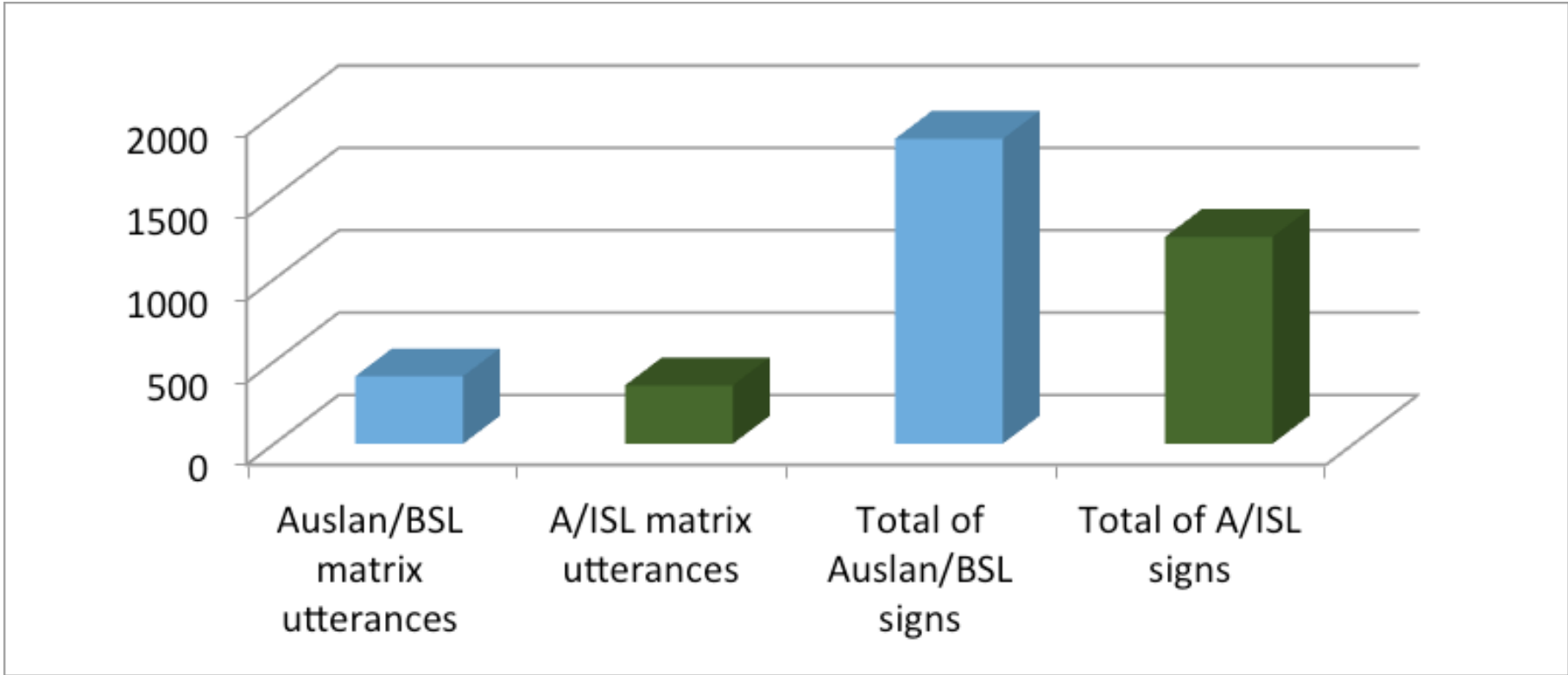
- From Auslan to AISL:
 - SF1: PRO1 START **S-T-A-R-T LEARN SIGN++**
 - I started to learn to sign
- From AISL to Auslan
 - MF2: **POINT NAME-SIGN DRESS CAN'T REMEMBER**
 - Person was dressed up, but I can't remember

Intersentential switches

- Auslan to AISL
 - MF2: DOOR-OPEN STRIDE G:wow /**NUN LOVE H-E-R** /GOOD T-O REMEMBER PRO3
 - The door would burst open and she would come striding in – the nuns really loved her and it is good to remember her
- Switches into Auslan were more frequent than switches into AISL

Intra-word switching – with fingerspelling

- MF2
 - HOT-E-S-T
 - ‘hottest’
- Would not be seen in spoken languages!



Frozen texts

- Most participants were able to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary perfectly in AISL
- Religion has always played a significant role in this language community, attrition is less evident in frozen texts than in other contexts



Difficulty in retrieval

- Schmid and Jarvis (2014) discuss language attrition as being characterised by lexical access difficulties, dysfluency phenomena, and cross-linguistic interference.
- The data in the conversations and interviews reveal a great deal of lexical access difficulties

Fingerspelling

- Fingerspelling in AISL following the use of an Auslan sign occurred frequently
- fingerspelled word in AISL produced instead of an AISL sign

Fingerspelling in place of an AISL sign

- MF3: NUN WHITE CL:habit PRO1 THOUGHT **B-L-A-C-K**
CL:B-outfit BECAUSE MY BROTHER GO SCHOOL POINT
B-L-A-C-K CL:B-outfit POINT W-H-I-T-E WELL
- ‘the nuns were dressed in a white habit, but because the nuns at my brother’s school wore a black habit I was expecting to see them wear black, but no, they were dressed in white’

Doubling

- Called reiterative codeswitching in the literature (eg Quinto-Pozos 2007, 2008 in relation to LSM, Mexican Sign Language)
 - SF1: WITH PRO1 LEARN SIGN/ POSS1 MOTHER **MOTHER FATHER GONE**
 - I learnt to sign after my parents left
 - MF2: POINT PRO1 THOUGHT/ALL NUN **NUN W-A-S MAN**
 - I thought all nuns were men

Doubling in AISL

- doubling from Auslan to AISL seems to occur freely within the clause
- does not happen across prosodic or clausal boundaries.
- many examples of doubling when fingerspelling was used

Doubling in AISL (fingerspelling)

- W-E WEATHER FUNNY NOW F-U-N-N-Y F-U-N-N-Y
- The weather is a bit funny these days



Doubling in AISL (from Auslan sign to AISL fingerspelling)

- MF2: POINT PRO1++ NEVER LIKE JAM J-A-M
- I've never liked jam

Doubling of entire clauses

- SF2: PRO1 REMEMBER / PRO1 R-E-M-E-M-B-E-R / PRO1 WENT T-O SCHOOL 1946 / PRO1 WAS NEARLY 6 Y-E-A-R-S-O-L-D
- I remember starting school in 1946 when I was almost six years old

Doubling using fingerspelling

- SF2 AND F-E-E-L COMFORTABLE C-O-M-F-O-R-T-A-B-L-E TO TALK TO POINT
- and we feel comfortable being able to talk to them

Sign language contact

- Deaf people use their linguistic resources - translanguaging
- These resources include
 - Signs from the two sign languages in contact – as with spoken languages
 - Fingerspelled items from the two fingerspelling systems in contact – very specific to sign languages