
RE-THINKING THE ORIGINS OF NEW ZEALAND SIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article introduces several pieces of fragmentary historical evidence to widen the evidential base from which theoretical reflection on the historical development of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) in New Zealand can take place. This task is attempted by two strategies. Firstly, the assembly and consideration of a number of historical fragments about deaf people or policies in New Zealand is made. Secondly, the discussion then turns to a core piece of historical data, focusing specifically on how the number of 42 deaf students near Christchurch in the mid-nineteenth century may have been generated, and how it feeds into a more general view of the historical development that occurred. The article asks whether the evidence presented satisfactorily supports the current conception of sign language development in New Zealand, or whether a broader conception might be useful in gaining insights into the way NZSL has emerged over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1. Introduction

It is generally considered that New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) developed from British Sign Language (BSL) brought to New Zealand by deaf immigrants and teachers of the deaf familiar with BSL, from the middle of the nineteenth century (Collins-Ahlgren 1989). For Collins-Ahlgren this belief is

part of a wider metropolitan-colonial understanding of sign languages: ‘...deaf communities in countries which are or have been politically affiliated with Britain have a language of sign derived from BSL’ (1989: 3). Writers such as Locker-McKee (1996) and McKee and Kennedy (1999, 2000) comment: ‘NZSL has its roots in British Sign Language (BSL)’ (McKee and Kennedy 1999: 59). The present article questions conventional assumptions of the genesis of NZSL by examining a range of historical data.

The presentation of this material helps problematise the automatic assumption that NZSL developed largely from BSL, and points to the need to verify empirically what the link between NZSL and BSL actually was or was not. Instead, a more accurate notion may be that NZSL developed substantively within New Zealand in response to the social and communicative needs and opportunities or constraints of the deaf here. The role of BSL, on this understanding, is read as one important factor, but not the determinative influence on the emergence of NZSL. Just how, and when, and to what extent, the various historical deaf linguistic transfers, creations and responses occurred, then becomes more open for empirical analysis and discussion. Such a challenge to the conventional view is based on the critical analysis of the limited data available in trying to answer the following question: What is the historical evidence that supports the current view?

The present paper takes the stance that a metropolitan-colony model acts as an unconscious presumption that clouds the story of the formation and dissemination of NZSL. Like the reception model in communication theory, the implicit assumption is of a near-determinative imperial society directing and shaping the experience of the passive colonial recipient. This view has provided the glue to bind together a disparate assortment of historical fragmentary facts that by no means in themselves constitute the evidential confirmation of the theory, but which are nevertheless commonly ‘read’ in this way. In an effort to get behind these overarching assumptions about the genesis of NZSL, a variety of these historical evidences are reviewed here to try to delineate more clearly what actually might count as reasonable inferences, and what goes beyond the range of sound historical research. The fragmentary data needs careful questioning.

2. Fragmentary evidence about NZSL

Seven available historical fragments dealing with the development of NZSL are presented and briefly described in broadly chronological order. Some limited discussion suggests the difficulty of building a developmental sequence out of them, whether deliberately or by implication. By way of general historical context, it can be noted that European settlement in New Zealand occurred later than in North America or even Australia. After European sighting by Cook in 1769, the trickle of settlers expanded in the early nineteenth century and from this point on European migration increased rapidly. For a general overview of New Zealand history see Sinclair and Dalziel (2000). By way of geographical context, it can be noted that the location of the three New Zealand cities referred to at various points below, are as follows: Christchurch is in the Canterbury region at the centre of the South Island; the capital city Wellington is situated at the southern end of the North Island; Auckland, the largest city, is close to the northern end of the North Island of New Zealand.

A first fragment with potentially strong evidence for a connection with BSL is to be found in Canterbury in the mid-nineteenth century. BSL is generally understood to have developed and spread early in the nineteenth century as the deaf in Britain gathered in numbers, at schools for the deaf and in social adult deaf groups (Deucher 1984). In New Zealand, for about a decade from the late 1860's, a teacher of the deaf from England, Dorcas Mitchell, taught a small group of five deaf children at Lyttleton (AJHR, 1879, H-17: 2). Mitchell used a sign language (probably an early form of BSL) among her pupils, but shortly before the New Zealand Government established the first state-funded school for the deaf at Sumner, near Christchurch, in 1880, Mitchell's group had disbanded. Though she was keen to be involved with this new educational venture the Government introduced a policy of oralism which forbade the use of sign language in the education of the deaf, and since she was unwanted at Sumner, Mitchell soon ended her involvement in deaf education in this country (Forman 2000). None of the children taught by Mitchell attended the school at Sumner and the sign-free policy at the new school meant some deaf children exposed to sign language were not welcome at Sumner. Inconsistencies abounded and some children taught in signing schools either in the United Kingdom or Australia did attend Sumner (Forman 1994). Indeed, a younger sibling of some of Mitchell's pupils attended Sumner

for short periods and he no doubt added signs to the increasing, but unofficial, lexicon there.

It is the present contention, however, that the signing skills of Mitchell's group, and those of the pupils at Sumner previously taught in signing (sometimes called manual) schools, would have had only a limited impact on the sign language developing within the school. It is difficult to substantiate an extrapolation that one or two short-term students among forty or fifty long-term students would have been very influential. Some limited lexical borrowing would have occurred but the essential character of the emerging NZSL would have been less strongly influenced than the standard model assumes.

A second fragmentary historical item from around 1899 identifies a private tutor of the deaf, a Miss Bruce, teaching in Auckland, in northern New Zealand, for six or seven years (Williams 1969). It is not known whether she advocated the use of sign language, or indeed how many students she had. Simply having taught here is sometimes used as tacit evidence that Bruce and her group helped promote and spread sign language. Without other corroborative data, it cannot be assumed there was much linguistic contact with other deaf outside the group. Formal deaf adult association did not begin until a couple of decades later: in 1922 the Canterbury Deaf Society was established; its northern equivalent, the Auckland Deaf Society, began in 1937. Informal deaf gatherings no doubt existed before these dates, but on a small and intermittent scale. Any evidence here would be useful in widening the information base.

It seems probable that neither of the groups around Mitchell or Bruce were central to the development of NZSL as they were outside Sumner, where for the first time large numbers of deaf gathered in one place for a long period of time. These three elements constitute the where and when of how NZSL truly began: sufficient numbers, significant association, duration of contact.

Fragment three, then, pertains to government policy towards the deaf in the later part of the nineteenth century, first in education and second in immigration. The Sumner School for the Deaf opened in 1880. Shortly after the school commenced, concern was raised about the children signing among themselves. A wider concern was that it was felt undesirable to allow the deaf to congregate in such numbers (AJHR, 1886, E-4: 2). The present research position is that there are major implications in those contemporary reports that fit a more complex model better than a simple metropolitan-colony model. Staff at the deaf school were well aware that signing existed, despite attempts to eradicate it. Over time, some Sumner ex-pupils were employed at the school in domestic duties, thus helping to spread and develop the emergent signing language.

Another attempt to link BSL and NZSL and to consider NZSL as an offspring language of BSL has been to propose that nineteenth century immigration policy brought here not only the British deaf but also their sign language. There is no doubt that deaf people, primarily from the UK and Ireland, came to New Zealand, but what form their language took, and how many and how much influence they had, is not nearly as clear. The assumption that there is a clear and unproblematic metropolitan-colony relationship is not warranted on the evidence currently available. Treating it as such has the effect of mystifying an issue that has the potential to help in repositioning our understanding of sign language.

A fourth cluster of fragmentary evidence concerns government statistics about the deaf. A reading of overall numbers of deaf in the colony, along with other information like gender balance in the Census data in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, argues against a stable population with which to maintain and pass on BSL. For example, from the 1861 Census to the 1864 Census, numbers of deaf here remained largely static (20 to 19), although the European population increased by over seventy percent, and the number of deaf females halved from nine to five. In 1871 the ratio of deaf males to deaf females was nearly 3:1 (28 males, 10 females), but a decade later in 1881 the numbers were almost identical (60 males, 54 females).

By 1911 the deaf population of New Zealand was 301, but five years later in 1916 the numbers had fallen by about a third to 206, while in the same period the general population had increased by nearly 100,000. This drop in deaf population was to about the same number enumerated two decades earlier in 1896. It needs to be remembered that these people were distributed throughout the country. There is no evidence here, either in terms of number, or in terms of duration over time, that clusters existed of BSL users sufficient to maintain and pass on their language.

Possibly the only official breakdown by country of origin for deaf people recorded in an official register is the 1916 Census. That Census was the last year that Census information was gathered on the deaf population here. It showed that of the 206 people counted as 'deaf and dumb' in New Zealand, 160 were born in New Zealand – that is, nearly eighty percent. But if this data is connected to the numbers increasing at Sumner around the turn of the century, it seems to tell *against* the idea of BSL being significantly influential at least as much as it does *for* the justification of a BSL source for NZSL. The question needs to be asked: Surely there would be more anecdotal, biographical or autobiographical accounts that offer greater support for the metropolitan-

colony view? It is noticeable by its absence. Perhaps new evidence is available but not yet assembled.

Again, in fragment five, government policy is central. Attempts to attract the 'right sort of immigrant' saw legislative restrictions of 'undesirables', such as the 1873 Imbeciles Passages Act, which levied a charge of £100 on captains who brought deaf people (among others) to New Zealand; and the 1899 Immigration Restrictions Act which prohibited immigrants who were 'idiot or insane'. According to Tennant (1996: 6), 'It is unlikely that such measures were rigorously enforced'. It has been noted that, 'migrants were both self-selecting and enticed, chosen and vetted by New Zealand officials... But the poorest, sickest or most handicapped were left behind, and so were under-represented in the new colony' (Thomson 1988: 19). Proportionately, the deaf were not present in New Zealand in the numbers that would be expected. An approximate guide for the ratio of deaf-to-hearing in a population is around 1:1000 though this varies from country to country and over time (Schein 1987). In New Zealand, Census data indicates that the ratio here was never less than 1:3500 during the period 1861 to 1916 and was as high as 1:9000 in 1884 and 1:5000 in 1916. The ever-changing makeup and fluctuating size of the deaf population in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century indicates the lack of a stable community able to introduce, maintain and spread BSL. Certainly Sumner, with its strict oralist policy, was not trying to do it!

Two final historical fragments are noteworthy for their interest but ambiguity. Fragment six: it appears few deaf lived in New Zealand at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and only a very few of these were migrants to New Zealand, and not all of these few were from Britain. It is also an unhelpful presumption to assume without clear confirmatory evidence that the few deaf that travelled here and stayed (many migrants left New Zealand shortly after arrival) bringing with them a sign language. It was not until 1893 that education of the deaf became compulsory in Britain and before the end of the nineteenth century it is believed as many as one-third of all eligible deaf children in Britain never attended school (Grant 1993). A number of the deaf who did come here had probably never met any other deaf person at school or at home, and may not have come across any in New Zealand either. Many deaf migrants arrived as infants and therefore had no previous deaf education and exposure to sign language. More than this, the belief that a standardised, universal BSL existed in the mid-nineteenth century, and is the reference point to which NZSL is related, remains conjectural without evidence adduced in support.

The seventh and final fragment to be considered raises a possible link to another sign language. An attempt to link Irish Sign Language (ISL) to NZSL (Locker-McKee 1996) is based on the assumption that church teachers of St. Dominics School for the Deaf brought with them ISL in their teaching. Though Locker-McKee notes that St. Dominics was an oral school, therefore disavowing sign language, and the teachers would not be encouraged to sign to their pupils, no evidence is offered to link ISL to NZSL other than one contradictory statement, 'Some Irish signs in NZSL may be traced to the Dominican nuns who ran St. Dominics, a private school for the deaf in Feilding [one hundred and fifty kilometres north of Wellington], although their policy was strictly against the use of sign language' (Locker-McKee 1996: 6).

Though the first teachers at St. Dominics had learned a sign language (possibly ISL) in Australia prior to beginning teaching here they did not adopt a manual approach to deaf education and instead were strictly oral. Sister Gemma Finlay, the last principal of St. Dominics School for the Deaf, says, 'During the 1960s there were some Irish Sisters at St Dominic's but they had done their teacher training in New Zealand and never used Irish Sign Language. They were strongly using the oral method by then and wouldn't have known the Irish manual system of sign language.' (Personal Communication 2003).

It seems that any tenuous links these historical fragments offer, equate to influence and impact, and alternative influences, as illustrated for example in this last fragment. Treating them as more than this, underplays and thus under-researches the indigenous NZSL developments and possibilities. The empirical basis of such an historical approach to deaf linguistics needs enhancement by much better quality historical evidence, or perhaps the need is to supplement the historical data with other evidence or analysis. It may be appropriate at this juncture to reconsider what may be the central factual evidence that the historical data offers in apparent support of the metropolitan-colony theory of NZSL derivation.

3. The meaning of the number forty-two!

Acknowledgement is offered to the author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in choosing the title for this section; the serendipitous importance of the number forty-two in both situations seems worth the exclamation mark. A

cornerstone of Collins-Ahlgren's belief in the colonial link between BSL and NZSL is her comment that Mitchell's 'student enrolment grew from four to forty-two in 1878' (Collins-Ahlgren 1989: 4); and that 'Mrs Mitchell was teaching forty-two deaf children in 1879' (Collins-Ahlgren 1989: 6). Collins-Ahlgren makes no mention as to the source of this information. The 1878 Census showed only ninety-two deaf people living in New Zealand, so on this reading of the facts it seems that nearly half of that population were attending Mitchell's school! The literal Census numbers, of course, need to be understood as inclusive of the full life-cycle age range. Only a proportion of that number would be of school age; and in the third quarter of the nineteenth century such a school-age subset of the Census total could be expected to be considerably smaller than today. Half the total is unlikely in the extreme. It is sufficient here to observe that if this were so it would be necessary to revise the whole historical implications of deaf education and community in this country. Yet the repeated statistic had simply passed into the folklore of deaf education.

However, these arguments are superfluous because Mitchell herself, writing in November 1878 – the Census year – stated that she had at that time taught at Lyttleton for over nine years 'in a clergyman's family here, where three of the children are deaf and dumb. I had also one pupil from Otago and one from Southland. Both of these were deaf and dumb' (AJHR, 1879, H-17: 2). The following year Mitchell, having endeavoured to formally establish a deaf school, noted her future intentions: 'there is a convenient house in Port Lyttleton capable of accommodating from fifteen to twenty pupils' (AJHR, 1879, H-17: 5). Interestingly it was not until 1888, eight years after its commencement, that the Sumner School roll itself reached 42 and government aid finally made it much easier for children in the 1880's than in the 1870's to receive deaf education in New Zealand.

Therefore Mitchell herself admits to having taught only five students over a period of about a decade and was planning on opening a school for fewer than twenty. Forty-two students would have been a very large school, and the evidential support is lacking; in fact present evidence points against such a number. Relying on this incorrect total would unwittingly have allowed Collins-Ahlgren to assume that BSL flourished here, gained a critical mass and progressively developed into NZSL.

Interestingly, in 1888 the assistant principal at Sumner reported the school had five teachers for 41 pupils (AJHR, 1890: E-11: 2). If Mitchell's putative school had indeed existed, on this basis she would have had to employ five or

six teachers to cater for 42 pupils, and perhaps the same number of support staff; provide a boarding establishment, and half a dozen classrooms. The absence of evidence of any of this is the more striking given the obviousness that such activity would have had.

It has, to date, been impossible to find any extant evidence that supports Collins-Ahlgren's claim of 42 pupils. Historians of the deaf and deaf studies researchers await much more detailed investigation of the establishment, development and consequences of the Summer School on deaf education and the deaf community in New Zealand. In personal communication with Collins-Ahlgren in 2000, her files were not accessible, and have not thus far yielded any clarification of possible sources for the number 42, either primary or secondary.

Large numbers of deaf children were gathered together at Sumner from 1880, and though the roll was only ten that first year, within three years it had reached thirty-one, fifty by 1892, and over one hundred pupils were at the School for the Deaf in Sumner (then New Zealand's only deaf school) in 1911. As mentioned earlier the school forbade the use of sign language in instruction in class or in conversation between the deaf. There is a huge irony in this – that the oralistic ideology of the official Sumner regime was being subverted at the very time of its development as the educational *modus operandi* for deaf in this country! Although van Asch, the principal of the school, was aware of children's signing outside the classroom, and was strongly opposed to manual practices, he was powerless to stop it. This covert system operated and allowed the deaf to embellish their communal language as most of the students boarded at the school, and remained there often for a decade or more. As the children matured intellectually and socially, and as time passed, an underground NZSL began to evolve despite what officialdom might say, and despite efforts by officialdom to prevent this. Oral schools, while arguably placing constraints on deaf children's classroom learning because they demand students learn an oral language at the expense of a signed language, have in that very process done much to foster sign language development and the formation of a deaf culture (Bragg 1997).

After leaving school for home and work the deaf felt a need to continue their association into adulthood. For many this was difficult, especially if they returned to their family away from other deaf. These deaf either moved to the main centres or remained isolated. Those who moved to large towns or stayed in Christchurch would have tried to maintain contact with fellow deaf friends. In these less linguistically restrictive situations NZSL would have become

more sophisticated and adapted to adult deaf needs. Slowly these gatherings became formalised, as indicated earlier - in Christchurch in 1922, Auckland in 1937 and Wellington in 1938. With the increase in deaf numbers and the burgeoning deaf network associations and the ease of travel, a unique culture (along with its language) evolved in New Zealand. The involvement of outsiders, including deaf migrants continues, but their influence it might be argued would appear to have been modificatory of this already existing NZSL rather than fundamental to its genesis. The development of a deaf language and community in New Zealand was well in the hands of the local deaf. The deaf of New Zealand have created and nurtured a truly unique language. Twenty years ago Woodward (1982) commented on what he termed the ethnocentrism of the approach that gives primacy to colonial links in sign language formation and which disregards or downplays the role of locals in creating their own language of sign from within.

4. Re-thinking the prevailing metropolitan-colony model of NZSL

The terms ‘colonial’ or ‘metropolitan-colony’ are used interchangeably as equivalent. There is no intention that these terms are pejorative. They are descriptive terms used in relation to the origins of NZSL, in the same way that such language is used to describe relations between colonies of any major European power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The rights and wrongs of those relationships in economic, political and cultural terms, is to be assessed on their own merits. As descriptive terms they are empirically testable. The position adopted in this paper is that a simple centre-periphery model used to explain most if not all of the development of NZSL does not find factual support in these historical materials.

The link between the Sumner School and the wider deaf community in New Zealand can be seen in the membership of the early deaf clubs. They were ex-Sumner pupils. The same link, however, is not available connecting Mitchell’s small group, BSL, and the wider deaf community. This imputed link is ‘read off’ the prevailing metropolitan-colonial model. Mitchell’s school roll was not 42 as claimed, and the BSL edifice is without historical foundation.

The current view interprets, often unwittingly, ambiguous or fragmentary factual material into a pre-existing model of deaf language evolution. BSL can be recognised as an important ingredient in the mix that modern NZSL has

now become. But it is to overstate the thesis beyond the support offered from the empirical historical data to posit that NZSL is simply and largely derivative from BSL – merely a linguistic outpost. Either the model needs new data to support it, or it may be necessary for the metropolitan-colonial to cede ground to a more nuanced socio-cultural model of the history of deaf in New Zealand.

The prevailing view of the development of NZSL that causes these items of historical data to be read according to the standard view, it is suggested here, fails to ‘see’ the empirical data. This is partly the accretion of the repeated expression of an outdated model based on very little fact or data that may be overdue for revision. It is partly the sheer paucity of documented material that limits reassessment. The larger international split of deaf learning and language development between the oralist and manual signing philosophies that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century was reflected in the New Zealand situation: Dorcas Mitchell on the one hand illustrated the manual signing way, but the crystallising of the government initiative around the oralist viewpoint, apparently on advice from England, on the other hand, shows the oralist vision that predominated.

Just as other aspects of contemporary understanding of the development of New Zealand society continues to benefit from the reassessment of standard views and received wisdom, it is perhaps worth doing the same with deaf historiography and linguistic analysis. Additional information widens the factual knowledge base of deaf history and thus provides an incremental foundation for reviewing how the origins of NZSL are best framed.

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