

Recent Development in Sign Linguistics in Sri Lanka

Kanakkahewa Pubodha Sarani, Kodithuwakku Koralege Brayan Susantha,
Liyanage Sumudu Sulochana Perera, Mataramba Kanatta Gamage Geshani Amila,
Mohamed Ramees Mohamed Razak

(Asia Pacific Sign Linguistics Research and Training Program,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

The living status of deaf communities is not up to the level of the living status of hearing people in Sri Lanka. Mainly there is no specially designed education system in Sri Lanka for deaf people and it has affected deaf people in many ways. Sri Lankan Sign Language is mainly used within the deaf community. Hearing people do not know that Sri Lankan Sign Language is a language.

Research on sign language

As one of the collaborators of the APSL program, UI sent two representatives to Hong Kong to As a well-trained team we have compiled three sign dictionaries along with student books. It took us six years to finish them all. Right now they are being translated to two main languages in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil. As there were no proper sign language dictionaries in Sri Lanka with linguistic value, the dictionaries we produce can contribute to the development of sign language in Sri Lanka.

Interviews have been conducted with deaf people within Colombo for collecting narrative and natural conversation data. The aim is to collect data for documenting Sri Lankan Sign Language for use in future research and to be shared on Asian SignBank.

In the north of Sri Lanka people speak the Tamil language and according to native deaf people, the sign language there is different from that in other areas of Sri Lanka. An APSL research team is planning on collecting data from this area in order to make systematic comparisons.

Training on sign language

As well-trained sign language teachers we have been teaching sign language in many places of Sri Lanka. Firstly, we have been teaching sign language in two faculties which belong to the University of Kelaniya. A hearing researcher was teaching sign linguistics.

Secondly, we all taught sign language in one of the leading international schools in Sri Lanka named Oasis. Also there is one government office where we taught sign language. Now people are becoming aware of sign language.

Community Service

With our return to Sri Lanka we have become involved with a number of government activities which help to develop Sri Lankan Sign Language and the living status of the Sri Lankan deaf community. The Ministry of Education is planning on making changes to deaf and mainstream school books, syllabuses, and training teachers to use proper sign language. One of our deaf researchers has been engaged with them to process the work.

In addition the Ministry of Social Service conducted an interpretation program for hearing people and one of the APSL deaf researchers has been invited to serve on the panel of examination. Also in the near future there will be more training for them from the APSL deaf researchers on sign language. The National Institute of Education is another government office which conducts sign language research and is getting involved with deaf researchers.

Deaf researchers have also participated in social work organized by the Sri Lankan Central Federation of Deaf (SLCFD), including helping the women association of the SLCFD and teaching sign language for deaf adults and children who were not exposed to sign language in their early childhood.

Besides SLCFD there are several projects that aim to improve the status of deaf people in Sri Lanka, and APSL deaf researchers are involved with them. One is the 'Ahanna' (listen) Buddhism program that involves research on signs related to Sinhala, Buddhism and Tamil below grade five.

APSL researchers have also been involved as consultants on the improvement of a Sri Lankan sign website which is called E-thakshilawa (E-School) . Concerning the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, deaf researchers go around Sri Lanka to inform the deaf people about their rights. Moreover APSL researchers made a video that gives information on how to apply for a passport, so that deaf people know the process and rules clearly.

There are number of projects in Sri Lanka that APSL deaf researchers have been participating in helping to lighten up the deaf community in many ways. At last we are thankful to The Nippon Foundation and the APSL program for all their support along the way.