

# **THE PHONOLOGY AND REGIONAL VARIATION OF FILIPINO SIGN LANGUAGE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR LANGUAGE POLICY**

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## PHONOLOGY

Filipino Sign Language is the visual language of the Filipino Deaf community (PFD, 2005: vii-ix ). It has developed naturally from the need to communicate within the community of Deaf Filipinos. Like other visual languages, its phonology, or fundamental level of structure is comprised of the parameters of handshape, location, movement, palm orientation and nonmanual signal (Philippine Deaf Resource Center and Philippine Federation of the Deaf, 2004: 2-59):

1. Handshape - the configuration of the selected fingers, the thumb and their joints
2. Location - the place where the hands are located, or, the place of contact of the hand (with the face, body or non-dominant hand)
3. Movement - a change in handshape (internal movement), or, location (path) of hand(s) along a line or arc
4. Palm Orientation - the direction which the palm faces
5. Nonmanual signal (NMS)- changes in the features of the face (mouth, eyes, cheeks, etc.) or other parts of the body (shoulder, etc.) which accompany the production of the manual signal by the hands

It should be noted that though NMS are a fundamental phonological parameter, they may also perform syntactic or discourse functions during sign conversations (PDRC and PFD, 2004: 112-121). This adds to the complexity of the analysis of sign language data.

## SIGN LANGUAGE VARIATION

There are many different ways of signing the same thing. These differences may be observed at different levels of structure: in the internal structure of signs, in whole signs, and in sentences.

According to noted linguist Dr. Ceil Lucas of Gallaudet University (Lucas 2005; PDRC and PFD, 2004: 144-45), there are three major kinds of variation in sign languages: phonological, lexical, and syntactic. In American Sign Language (ASL), such variation takes place through long periods of time. Phonological variation in ASL involves changes generally in handshape, location and palm orientation. Different forms of a sign comprise lexical variation. Syntactic variation includes differences in sentence structure.

## VARIATION IN FILIPINO SIGN LANGUAGE

There are numerous Deaf signing communities throughout the regions of the Philippines.

The natural language, Filipino Sign Language (or FSL) is used in the community, but not in teaching in the formal educational system. Variation in FSL has been documented in fieldwork by researchers of the Philippine Federation of the Deaf (PFD, 2005; Agravante 2005).

#### FACTORS AFFECTING FSL VARIATION

Variation in FSL appears to be affected by different factors (Agravante 2005):

##### 1. Gender

Differences have been noted between male and female Deaf signers. Most of the traditional forms appear to originate from male signers while newer variants are observed among female signers.

Examples:

BEAUTIFUL

WOW

TRICK

##### 2. Age

Different signs are observed among older and younger Deaf signers.

Examples:

DANCE

CANON

COMPUTER

TELEPHONE

##### 3. Geographical location

Variation is observed in the different areas of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Urban and rural signing also show differences.

##### 4. History of sign language use

A source of variation in FSL is language contact. Thus, it becomes important to document who started (or brought) signing to the area. Contact in particular with ASL (through the U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers, or religious missionaries) has led to variation in the sign language of Deaf Filipinos.

Locally, contact of a signing community may take place with signing from Metro Manila (e.g., with the School for the Deaf and Blind, or the Philippine School for the Deaf), or another signing community (e.g., the Laguna D.E.A.F.).

##### 5. Nature of the Deaf community

Further variation in the language involves the profile of the signing community: e.g., in terms of the number of young Deaf signers, and the Deaf adults. The presence of schools, churches and other organizations are likely to promote variation. Areas within the community where Deaf signers congregate and interact, e.g., the *plaza* or park, also provide environments for the spread of variation.

TYPES OF VARIATION OBSERVED

Since the initiation of the Dictionary for Asia-Pacific Sign Languages project of the Philippine Federation of the Deaf (PFD) in 2003, Deaf researchers of PFD have been observing and documenting variation in FSL. Variants more readily observed were phonological or lexical in nature. Examples are given below (PFD, 2005; PFD, In progress).

1. PHONOLOGICAL VARIATION

Examples:

Sign	No. of hands	Hand shape	Loc	Movement	PO	NMS	Researcher
PIG (Iligan)	1	A to B; lateral thumb alignment	Chin	Straight, away from signer (with initial contact on chin)	Down	Lip pout	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:151)
PIG (Bicol)	1	A to B; lateral thumb alignment	Chin	(No path) Contact	Down	Lip pout	Abat 2004
COW (Bicol)	1	B; Lateral thumb alignment	Chin	Contact, then downward straight path (with apparent internal movement of forearm)	Side	None	Abat 2004
COW (Samar)	1	B; Lateral thumb alignment	Chin	Continuous contact with apparent internal movement of forearm	Side	None	Agravante 2004

2. LEXICAL VARIATION

Examples:

<u>Sign</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Researcher</u>
PIG	Leyte	Agravante 2004
PIG	Samar	Agravante 2004
PIG	Iligan	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:151)
PIG	Palawan	Agravante 2005
PIG	Cavite	Agravante 2004
PIG	Lucena	Apurado 2004

COW	Leyte	Agravante 2004
COW	Palawan	Agravante 2005
COW	Samar	Agravante 2004
PINEAPPLE	Cagayan de Oro	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:150)
PINEAPPLE	Cotabato	Apurado 2004
PINEAPPLE	Palawan	Agravante 2005
SHARK	Leyte	Agravante 2004
SHARK	Samar	Agravante 2004
SHARK	Palawan	Agravante 2005
SHARK	Cagayan de Oro	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:128)
COCKFIGHT	Bacolod	Apurado 2004 (PFD, 2005:86)
COCKFIGHT	Samar	Agravante 2004
COCKFIGHT	Cotabato	Apurado 2004
COCKFIGHT	Palawan	Agravante 2005
TOMBOY	Manila	Siloterio 2004
TOMBOY	Iligan	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:163)
TOMBOY	Palawan	Agravante 2005
<i>BAKLA</i>	Manila	Siloterio 2004
<i>BAKLA</i>	Samar	Agravante 2004
DOG	Bicol	Abat 2004 (PFD, 2005:5)
DOG	Samar	Agravante 2004
DOG	Iligan	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:142)
WIND	Palawan	Agravante 2005
WIND	Cagayan de Oro	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:135)
WIND	Leyte	Agravante 2004
FATHER	Palawan	Agravante 2005
FATHER	Samar	Agravante 2004
FATHER	Leyte	Agravante 2004
LEAF	Palawan	Agravante 2005
LEAF	Cagayan de Oro	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:138)
LEAF	Samar	Agravante 2004
LEAF	Cavite	Agravante 2004 (PFD, 2005:30)

### 3. SYNTACTIC VARIATION

The focus of the PFD's Dictionary project so far has been phonological and lexical variation. A sample of syntactic variation is given below.

[English translation: The father loves his son.]

Variant #1

PRO.3a \_\_\_\_\_t LOVE PRO.3b \_\_\_\_\_nd+  
FATHER SON

Variant #2

PRO.3 \_\_\_\_\_hf \_\_\_\_\_hb \_\_\_\_\_nd+  
SON FATHER LOVE

Variant #3

PRO.3 \_\_\_\_\_t \_\_\_\_\_nd+  
FATHER SON LOVE

Notes on transcription of NMS

- t Topicalization marker (brow raise)
- hn Clause end marker (head nod)
- + Repeat
- hf Head bent forward
- hb Head bent backward
- PRO.3 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun
- a, b Pronoun loci
- \_\_\_\_\_ Duration of NMS

Future research shall hopefully reveal more data on this complex type of variation.

#### FSL VARIATION AND LANGUAGE POLICY

The past two years of fieldwork documentation of regional variation have shown a richness of FSL which has never been before documented. Most hearing Filipinos, even those in the educational system, view the language of the Deaf community as crude and unoriginal. Others even presume the signs of the Deaf community to be completely borrowed. These are wrong assumptions and are refuted by the data gathered by the PFD.

An important consideration for language policy is the application to Deaf education. Deaf children should have the freedom to communicate in their own natural language (specially if these are signs unique to the region). This natural visual language is their own language both in an individual and community context.

Filipino Sign Language should also be used in teaching Deaf students. This is because

this is the most easily understandable language for imparting knowledge and information.

Using FSL in the educational system also nurtures the cultural ties of communication of Deaf Filipinos. It strengthens the local signing community from within. It also encourages respect between communities. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the Deaf communities documented throughout the country so far parallel the richness of spoken Philippine languages.

The examples of the regional variation presented here are a means to motivate teachers and interpreters for them to recognize the indigenous richness of Filipino Sign Language as a true language.

There are many issues which need to be considered in sign language planning. Baseline data gathered by the National Sign Language Committee (PFD, In progress) point to the use of sign language in education, interpreting, sign language instruction and media, as critical areas. Some of these concerns were raised by sociolinguist Dr. Ceil Lucas during a recent planning initiative (2005):

1. Nurturing sign language variation while addressing the need for lexical standardization in education and interpreting
2. Specific guidelines on use of regional signs in Deaf education in: the National Capital Region, other regions
3. Specific guidelines on use of regional signs by interpreters in: the National Capital Region, other regions
4. Use of regional signs in media

The PFD has initiated discussion on the above but nationwide consultation and planning is essential.

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