

16.30 – 17.00

Josefina Safar: *Village Sign Languages as Endangered Languages – An Analysis of Discourse about Chican Sign Language (Mexico)*

This paper examines how language attitudes and language ideologies about an endangered minority sign language are constructed and established through discourse. The focus of the study is the Chican SL, an indigenous sign language used both by deaf and hearing people in a Yucatec Mayan village with high incidence of hereditary deafness. The existence of a local sign language was discovered in the 1970s and, since then, the Chican SL has been studied by linguists and anthropologists under various aspects (e.g. Shuman 1980, Johnson 1991, Fox Tree 2009, Le Guen 2012, Escobedo Delgado 2012). Apart from scientific research, the village Chican has received a great deal of attention by local, national and international media, government bodies and NGOs. Several institutions have worked in the village, carrying out audiometry, distributing hearing aids and developing strategies to “improve” life in Chican.

By critically examining the ways the language and its community are represented in different contexts, one becomes aware of the diverging and often contradictory attitudes and values that stand behind them. Sign linguists and anthropologists recognise the widespread use of a unique and elaborated sign language as well as the absence of communication barriers for deaf people in Chican as a matter of fact and the village is seen as a “symbol” of an inclusive society. Parallel to that, the value of indigenous minority languages as a part of Mexico’s multicultural heritage is highlighted by language policy makers. At the same time, media reports provide a platform where medical and pathological discourse and discriminating attitudes towards sign languages and deaf people still continue to thrive.

In my paper, I argue that the way of *talking about language through language* reflects different social interests and plays a crucial role for the vitality or endangerment of a language. Despite their relevance, respective studies about village sign languages have been scarce (see Kusters forthcoming 2014 for language ideologies in the shared signing community of Adamorobe, Ghana).

For my research project, a comprehensive text corpus was compiled, including scientific, legal-political and media representations of the topic between 1982 and 2014. Different discourses about the Chican SL in the dynamic sociopolitical landscape of a multilingual country have been analysed, considering how they have changed over the years. A sample of the media reports has been selected and further examined by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Wodak 2001). Additionally, ethnographic data was gathered during my fieldwork in Chican and is used as a backdrop for the discourse analysis of the texts. I will show that the language and its community are objects of conflicting ideologies that do not necessarily coincide with local language practices.

References

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