

On the importance of linguistic study of RSL¹

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The linguistic study of sign languages is a special and highly developed field of linguistics. However, in Russia this field is, as yet, insufficiently developed. I would like to offer some thoughts on why it should be actively developed.

I am in no way a specialist on sign languages and I must therefore begin with an explanation of my connection with this field of linguistics. In the course of my professional career I, like the overwhelming majority of linguists, have been concerned with spoken languages. In short, my basic interests are the cognitive bases of language and the study of oral language and the diversity of human languages. Although I am concerned with spoken languages, I have occasionally come across research into sign languages. It so happens that, in many instances, this was the work of Western colleagues.

In the 1980s, while I was still a student, from time to time I saw and read work by American linguists on American Sign Language (ASL). At that time the 'Iron Curtain' was in place and we did not get all the research information from abroad. However, thanks to personal contacts between researchers, some publications did find their way into the USSR. At that time publications on ASL seemed highly surprising. For us it was unusual for sign language research to be included among research into ordinary spoken languages. Sign languages were at that time *terra incognita* for me, and the idea of studying them never even entered my head. At the same time I felt that the existence of such research was an indication of the level of humanitarian development in a society and of the attention given to the *realia* of the life of minorities. Such attention was not characteristic of Soviet society. The few pieces of sign language research done in Russia were little known to

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linguisticians (the interest in RSL of the celebrated psycholinguistician R.M. Frumkina was an exception. See Zaitseva and Frumkina, 1981).

In 1992, when I was on a research visit to the University of New Mexico in the USA, I got to know Sherman Wilcox, a leading expert on ASL; his views on sign language made a big impression on me. For example, it was then that I learned that ASL is related to French Sign Language, but not to British Sign Language. Wilcox asked me who was working on sign language in Russia. I had no answer, but, on returning home, I set about clarifying this and got to know the remarkable Russian specialist and pioneer of sign language research Galina Lazarevna Zaitseva, and her work (Zaitseva, 1991). I conceived the idea of enlisting student linguisticians into the study of sign language, but at the time did not have the opportunity of implementing this idea.

In 1997, during another visit to America, I had the good fortune to attend a lecture by William Stokoe, an outstanding man who, at the end of the 1950s, had raised the question of the status of ASL and had single-handedly succeeded in persuading the American establishment of the validity of the language. Events like this shed light on the old argument about the role of personality in history. It is quite clear that this man's courage and sense of purpose made possible the recognition of ASL as a normal human language. These events in America sparked off analogous processes in other countries. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Stokoe's work for all sign language users and researchers. At the same time it must be admitted that his success was made possible by a favourable social climate, by the liberalization which began in the West in the 1960s. Despite the opposition and conservatism of many colleagues, by the beginning of the 1970s Stokoe had succeeded in acquiring for ASL the status of a subject worthy of scientific investigation. The story of this struggle is set out briefly in Stokoe's 1990 article.

Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, I began to teach in the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, part of the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University. In my lectures I gave the students, who were training as professional linguisticians, a brief account of sign languages and tried to persuade someone from amongst them to turn their attention to RSL. (I myself was very busy with different projects and unable to involve myself deeply in this research). Only in 2000 did my challenges bear fruit. Elena Prozorova became the first student seriously to interest herself in RSL. She wrote two pieces of coursework on RSL

(Prozorova 2004, 2005), as well as a finals dissertation (Prozorova, 2006). From the very beginning her work was interesting and profound; she was able to produce a synthesis between inner knowledge of the subject on the one hand, and linguistic competence and expertise on the other, a synthesis which should be the aim of all linguistic research. At present Elena Prozorova is doing postgraduate work and writing a dissertation on RSL.

On the basis of her finals dissertation we have published a piece of joint research into referential processes in RSL (Kibrik and Prozorova, 2007). I will dwell later on several ideas contained in this research.

A number of other studies have made useful and interesting contributions to RSL research: aspectual/tense categories (Lvovskaia, 2006; Shamaro, 2006. See also Shamaro 2007); the expression of negativity (Kimmelman, 2007); question words (Viktorova, 2007). I hope that at least some of these students will continue their RSL research and contribute to the study of the subject.

Perhaps this account of such studies may cause some surprise: how can one study a language without being a user of that language, without practical mastery of it? Indeed, our students, who encounter RSL users for the first time in the course of their studies, do not have mastery of RSL from the outset. However, this is a common situation for linguists. Among the approximately 6000 spoken languages in the world, only a few are well researched and described. The vast remainder have only been described fragmentarily. At the present time a vital task for linguistics is the description of such languages which are, as a rule, used by small populations in remote places. Such languages are usually studied by using the methods of so-called field linguistics. The field linguist goes to the place where a given language is used; his/her task is quickly to obtain information about the grammar and vocabulary of the language. In the process of this work a partial mastery of the language is obtained, but this is neither the purpose nor the prerequisite of a successful piece of work. Scientific information is obtained, as a rule, via a bilingual interpreter, who has a good knowledge both of the language under research and of a mediating language (Russian, English etc.). Therefore, attempts to begin the scientific study of a language without acquiring practical knowledge of it in advance are, in principle, neither strange nor incorrect. This, of course, does not alter the fact that a practical knowledge of a language under

research is a plus, and I hope that young researchers into RSL will gradually alleviate their task by mastering the language, both theoretically and practically.

In the remaining part of my paper I would like to devote some time to three aspects of the usefulness of the linguistic study of RSL: for linguistics, for the Deaf community and for society as a whole.

Linguistics and the study of RSL

What use can the study of RSL be for linguistic science? In linguistics the traditional view is that language = sound. Recently it has become clear that this view is very narrow and a distortion of reality. Even in spoken languages communication is accompanied by a visual information channel. This comprises gestures, which accompany oral speech, facial expression and so-called 'body language' (in particular the poses adopted by the speaker). All these communicative elements play a big role and can change the meaning of verbal elements – for example, when a compliment is paid with a grimace of discontent. Linguisticians are becoming more and more interested in visual elements and their interaction with the verbal component.

All the more important, then, is the visual channel for those languages which lack a sound channel i.e. sign languages. It must be acknowledged that there are two types of language, which differ as to their information channel: spoken languages and sign (or visual) languages. There is a need to study, in addition, the phenomenon of tactile languages, used by people for whom both the sound and the visual channels are closed i.e. deaf-blind people.

At the present time the hypothesis is being widely discussed that in the beginning, when the genus Homo Sapiens was being formed, human language was sign language, and that spoken languages only developed at a later stage. On the whole it is possible to say that linguistic science which does not take account of sign language gives a relatively flat picture of linguistic reality. The reverse is also true. Taking full account of sign language as a second, equally valid, type of language, will, in the future, allow a more accurate understanding of human languages and a new view of spoken languages.

Here is an example from the work of Prozorova and Kibrik, 2007, which is linked with the process of reference. When a person talks about something, as a rule they mention people or objects – this is called reference. In Russian mention of objects or people in the

ambient space can be made using pronouns; such pronouns are often accompanied by indicative gestures. For example, if I want to direct the attention of my interlocutor to a certain person, I can say *Call him*, at the same time making an indicative gesture. In RSL indicative gestures themselves act as pronouns.

In addition, in RSL it is possible to indicate elements of imagined space. In the research carried out by Prozorova retellings of a short film were collected; the RSL users first watched the film and then had to retell its content. In the film there is one episode where a man appears on the screen and leads a goat on a rope towards the observer. The RSL user, in retelling this episode, shows where the man is in relation to the observer and then uses this place in his 'sign space' to mention the man with the goat. That is to say, the narrator constructs a space around himself/herself, remembers the disposition of objects in reality and arranges them analogously in sign space. The person addressed also understands where each of the participants is situated, and this enables the narrator quickly and economically to mention participants in the events who were introduced earlier.

This means of reference is practically unknown in linguistics. Thus, research into RSL enables us to establish a radically new type of reference. It is interesting that the discovery of this phenomenon also has consequences for the understanding of spoken languages: it transpires that in spoken languages a 'constructed space' is used when gesticulation is employed, although it does not play the same role as in sign languages. This example graphically demonstrates the usefulness of studying RSL for linguistic science as a whole.

The Linguistic study of RSL and the Deaf community

Of what use can the work of linguisticians be to the Deaf community? As far as I know, RSL users often do not realise that this language is the equivalent of spoken languages. If RSL becomes a respectable and normal subject of scientific analysis, this must enable RSL users themselves to view it in a new way, as a fully fledged language. This happened in America in the 1960s and 1970s. In our society the process of recognising RSL is encountering difficulties, but it will inevitably happen.

A language which is the subject of research can easily become a medium of instruction, like any of the languages of the Russian Federation or any foreign language. The recognition of RSL in a scientific context can lead to its recognition in other contexts.

In the course of scientific study a more direct, concrete use to the users of RSL can come from the work of professional linguists. Modern scientific knowledge about the structure of language can be used to compile modern dictionaries and grammars. Although the vocabulary and grammar of RSL has been partially described, it is clear that in this area much remains to be done, and it will be much better if trained and qualified linguists help in this work. This will help to avoid the difficulties and mistakes which are not infrequent in sign language grammars and dictionaries.

The linguistic study of RSL and humanitarian problems

Russian society officially recognises the equality of big and small languages. The Constitution states that languages spoken by a few thousand or a few hundred people have the right to exist and to be supported by society. Although there are big gaps in the implementation of this, all the same small languages do receive this support to some degree. But RSL, which is used by hundreds of thousands of people, is not officially recognised. Thus the principle of linguistic equality is broken. RSL is the native language of very many citizens of the Russian Federation and this fact must be taken as the basis for developing legal principles, social norms and pedagogical practice.

I think that linguists can influence the people who formulate such social norms. The scientific study of RSL can play a role in its wider recognition in the Russian Federation as a real language. This is what happened in the USA – we mentioned this above. As a result sign languages were officially recognised not only in large developed countries but also in a range of countries which are not normally included in this category, such as Slovakia, Venezuela and Uganda.

Not only does the All-Russian Federation of the Deaf (VOG) have an interest in the recognition of RSL, but the whole of society in its evolution towards greater humanity and respect for the rights of minorities. On such processes in various countries see Komarova, 2007.

In 2010 there will be a census in the Russian Federation and it is important that RSL figures in the list which the census-takers will receive as one of the possible native languages. The Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences will participate in drawing up recommendations for the census and I will strive to see this point reflected in those recommendations.

In conclusion, a few general observations. I think that interaction between the Deaf community and linguists is a positive process, in which there can be no losers. It is essential to organise and set up closer cooperation between interested linguists, teachers of the Deaf and RSL users. For young linguists who are beginning to work in this area, without a point of departure, this is fairly complicated. Of course, contacts with native-born RSL users are not always easily made. I would like to believe that this interaction will develop and that teachers of the Deaf will give their support to the linguists. I hope that in the future there will be an increase in the number of professional linguists who are native signers. This is another important direction in which our thinking can move.

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