

## Foreword

Welcome to this special issue of TEANGA, which presents a selection of papers on the linguistics and applied linguistics of Irish Sign Language. This publication is timely, coming in the academic year that celebrates the nineteenth anniversary of the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin (est. 2001), and the year in which when Irish Sign Language Act (2017) is due to formally commence.

Linguistic consideration of Irish Sign Language is a recent phenomenon. The first doctoral level work on the language was completed by Barbara LeMaster, an American working in the field of linguistic anthropology, who documented the gendered, generational variation that was once highly visible in the Irish Deaf community. Her work, published in the early 1990s, was amongst the first academic work referencing Irish Sign Language (LeMaster, 1990; LeMaster & O'Dwyer, 1991). It offers an incredible glimpse at some of the most striking sociolinguistic features of Irish Sign Language – the impact that segregated schooling, educational philosophies, attitudes to language use and attitudes to gender have had on men and women, boys and girls and opened up an avenue for further research in this area (Grehan, 2008; Leeson & Grehan, 2004).

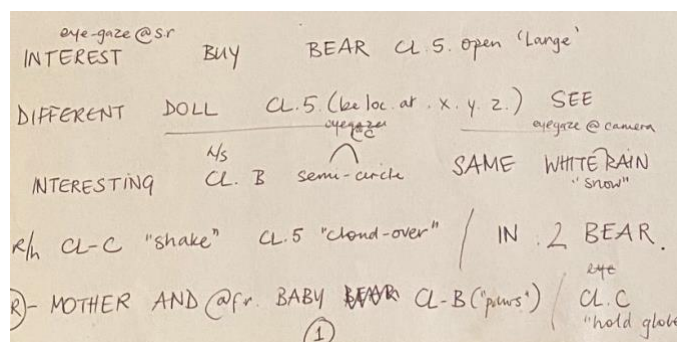
The Centre for Language and Communication Studies (CLCS) at Trinity College Dublin has been a nurturing space for sign language related work since the mid 1980s. Following from the establishment of the Irish Deaf Society, and at the request of then secretary, Helena Saunders, CLCS ran extra-mural ISL classes, the first higher education institute in the state to do so. Prof. David Little was key in making this happen, and indeed, in championing opportunity that fostered work on ISL in Trinity. In the early 1990s, Prof Little supervised then vice-principal of St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, Frank Maguire, to completion of an M.Phil in Applied Linguistics, which laid out a roadmap for would be researchers of ISL (Maguire, 1991). In 1992, the Irish Deaf Society and Trinity College Dublin partnered with Bristol University in a European Commission funded project that supported the training of a cohort of Irish Sign Language interpreters and teachers for the first time. Sign linguistics formed a key thread in that training, and given the lack of description of most sign languages at

that time, much effort went into extrapolating from what was known about American Sign Language and British Sign Language with respect to ISL. Several graduates of that TCD-Bristol programme went on to complete masters degrees in linguistics/applied linguistics at CLCS. Of these, Patrick A. Matthews, Senan Dunne and Evelyn Nolan went on to work on the Irish Sign Language project at ITÉ, leading to the publication of the 1996 volume, “The Irish Deaf Community, Volume 1” (Matthews, 1996). That same year, Patrick McDonnell completed a PhD on verb structure in ISL at Trinity (McDonnell, 1996).

In 2000, Patrick Matthews and Dónal O’Baoill published a volume on the linguistics of Irish Sign Language (O’Baoill & Matthews, 2000). In 2001, building on the work of McDonnell, Lorraine Leeson completed her PhD on aspects of verbal valency in ISL (Leeson, 2001).

With the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies came new challenges: the Centre’s goals were to establish education pathways in Deaf studies, interpreting and sign language teaching, and to develop a research profile for Deaf studies in Ireland. These goals intersected, requiring research to inform teaching and evidence based practice in interpreting, sign language teaching, but also a myriad of other fields where stakeholders engage with signers.

Across the decades, the technologies available to sign language researchers have changed exponentially. In the 1990s and early 2000s, freestanding video cameras were used to record data, and real-time transfer of data was required to move content to VHS tape, and any annotation of data was made by hand, as in example 1 below.



Example 1. Handwritten gloss of an ISL version of “The Bear” story, glossed by Lorraine Leeson c.2000

By the early 2000s, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, had developed a programme for researchers working on oral languages and gesture research called ELAN. For sign language researchers, ELAN opened up the possibility of digitally annotating and searching multiple files, whereas previous to this, short utterances could be captured in a US built programme, SignStream<sup>1</sup>. Further, ELAN was (and is) free and open source software. In Ireland, the potential of ELAN, coupled with awareness of work at the Centre for Language and Communication Studies on the corpus of Irish-English (Jeffrey Kallen) prompted the development of an Irish Sign Language corpus – The Signs of Ireland Corpus (SOI). Among the first of the digital corpora of a sign language created, the SOI corpus contains monologic data from 40 ISL signers from across Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Galway and Cork. All signers attended St. Mary’s School for Deaf Girls or St. Joseph’s School for Deaf Boys. The SOI corpus was annotated across 2004-7 by Deirdre Byrne-Dunne, Cormac Leonard and Alison MacDuff (all CDS graduates), and served as a key resource in teaching and learning and in research. To date, several postgraduate studies have drawn on the corpus (Fitzgerald, 2014; Mohr-Militzer, 2011; Murtagh, 2019; Thorvaldsdottir, 2013), with several others in preparation (Smith, Dunskey). The corpus has also underpinned a volume length description of ISL (Leeson & Saeed, 2012).

Across the years, we have also seen research on language policy (e.g. Conama, 2010, 2012; Rose & Conama, 2017); deaf education (Mathews, 2011; O’Connell, 2013); aspects of the teaching, learning and assessment of ISL (e.g. Hoffman, Goslin, Nolan, Leeson, & Sheikh, 2010; Leeson & Grehan, 2010; Sadlier, 2007; Sheridan, 2019); and

on a variety of aspects of sign language interpreting (e.g. Leeson, 2005; Leeson & Foley-Cave, 2007; Leeson, Wurm, & Vermeerbergen, 2011; Lynch, 2015; Rozanes, 2014; Sheridan, 2009; Stone & Leeson, 2018; Venturi, 2020).

European project work has prompted and enabled a wide range of research that is transdisciplinary in nature. Through such projects, we have seen increased attention given to aspects of deaf signers' engagement with public services and employment opportunities (e.g. the MEDISIGNS project (which looked at deaf signers access to healthcare) (Leeson, Sheikh, Rozanes, Grehan, & Matthews, 2014); the JUSTISIGNS project, (which primarily looked at access to policing) (see Leeson, Flynn, Lynch and Sheikh, this volume); the Justisigns2<sup>2</sup> project (with a focus on gender based violence and access to services, underway – led by Haaris Sheikh); the DESIGNS project (focusing on access to employment for deaf graduates) (Napier, Cameron, Leeson, Conama, Rathmann, Peters & Sheikh, 2020); the development of sign language resources (e.g. the DCU ISL STEM Project; the Hidden Histories Project<sup>3</sup>, the D-Signs Project); and fed into pan-European discussion on the teaching and learning of sign languages via the European Centre for Modern Languages PRO-Sign projects<sup>4</sup>. The PRO-Sign projects, in turn, have generated awareness of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio (see Grehan and Leeson, this volume) amongst sign language teachers and policy makers (Leeson & van den Bogaerde, 2019, in press), culminating in informing the Council of Europe's modality inclusive CEFR-Companion Volume, published in 2020 (Council of Europe, 2020).

In short, for a small island community on the western shores of Europe, with a small community of researchers working on aspects of Irish Sign Language, we have completed a significant body of research work in a short space of time with relatively little investment.

In November 2018, the Irish Deaf Research Network (IDRN) organised the inaugural Irish Deaf Research Conference on Irish Sign Language and Deafness. IDR2018 was hosted by the Centre for Deaf Studies at the Trinity Long Room Hub. Whereas, prior meetings on aspects of Deaf studies research attracted a handful of attendees, IDR2018 was fully booked, with standing room only. It drew community members,

students and researchers from institutions across the state at all stages of education, as well as some presenters who work on ISL in other countries. The conference showcased a myriad of work that spanned many disciplinary boundaries but had one thing in common – a focus on Irish Sign Language. We are delighted that several of the eight papers included in this volume had their debut presentation at IDRN2018. We take the opportunity to provide a sense of what each of the papers to follow covers.

Leonard and Conama challenge the notion that the history of ISL began with the establishment of the schools for deaf girls and boys in Cabra, in 1846 and 1857 respectively. This paper provides a fascinating window into the past, leveraging historical evidence of signing in Ireland as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century and providing us with a layered and diverse account of the history of ISL.

Smith and Hofmann present a lexical frequency analysis of ISL, drawing on data from the Signs of Ireland corpus and produce the first objective lexical frequency analysis for ISL. The data is presented in the context of four previous lexical frequency studies carried out on sign language data for a range of other sign languages and their findings show similar patterns of grammatical class usage occur across all five datasets. The authors find that the establishment of a lexical database for ISL would guarantee conformity across lexical glossing, which would in turn allow for more robust analysis of ISL.

Leeson and Saeed provide a cognitive linguistic account of passive constructions in ISL, drawing on the Signs of Ireland corpus and also the European Commission funded Medisigns project as data sources. This paper explores passive constructions in ISL, with a particular focus on the use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified Actor. Leeson and Saeed outline the importance of the role of embodiment for understanding how passives operate in ISL.

Murtagh lays out an account of ISL verbs, using Role and Reference Grammar as the underlying theory of grammar. She leverages a recently proposed level of lexical representation, Articulatory Structure Level, in the development of a linguistically

motivated computational definition of lexicon entries that are sufficiently robust in nature to represent ISL verbs within the Role and Reference Grammar lexicon.

With a focus on sign language learning, Grehan and Leeson report on the findings of a pilot study that introduced the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to a cohort of adult M2L2 Irish Sign Language learners in a higher education setting. They outline how the ELP functions as a valuable tool for planning and navigating the progress of learners in tandem with guidance from their teacher. The use of the ELP as a tool that supports both individual learner and peer reflection on language learning is also reported here.

Fingerspelling is a ubiquitous but under-analysed phenomenon in ISL. In this paper, Leeson, Sheridan, Cannon, Murphy, Newman and Veldheer explore the use of fingerspelling by new adult learners of ISL (A-level learners in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)). Drawing from the Second Language Acquisition Corpus (ISL-SLAC), the authors discuss the use of fingerspelling among M2L2 learners in comparison to native signers. This study – the first consideration of data from the ISL-SLAC – produces very interesting findings in relation to the frequency of fingerspelling among ISL learners and also shines a light on the importance of fingerspelling as a tool for learners when ISL vocabulary is unknown.

Leeson, Flynn, Lynch and Sheikh provide an overview of how the Irish justice system responds to deaf signers. They set out to document and benchmark current levels of provisions and reflecting on how provision maps to the obligations outlined in the Irish Sign Language Act (2017) and the UNCRPD (2006). They identify a number of systemic issues and, consequential limited opportunities for evidence-led practice for all parts of the justice system that engages with deaf signers in Ireland.

The final paper in this volume presents us with insights into team interpreting, taking both Deaf-hearing and hearing-hearing teams into consideration. O’Callaghan and Lynch shine a light on the importance of team interpreting at both a national and international level and outline how this is instrumental to ensuring high quality output for those accessing events via interpretation.

We would very much like to thank those who provided us with the opportunity to work on this very special volume of TEANGA, particularly TEANGA editors Stephen Lucek, Colin Flynn and Úna Bhreathnach for their advice and support.

Finally, while sign linguistics research is relatively young, we have lost some of our number along the way. We dedicate this volume to the memory of Evelyn Nolan and Laura Sadlier, both taken from us all too early. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.*

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.bu.edu/asllrp/SignStream/3/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://justisigns2.com>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.tcd.ie/slscs/assets/documents/news-events/Hidden%20Histories%20Ireland.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ecml.at/Thematicareas/SignedLanguages/tabid/1632/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>