



4

THE COMMUNITY OF INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE USERS, THEIR COMMONALITIES AND DIVERSITY



Notes

In this lesson, you will learn that there is a lot of variation in the deaf community, and they get exposure to sign language at different ages. Some children may be born to signing deaf parents and hence get a rich linguistic environment from day one, whereas some deaf children may get exposure to sign language quite late in life. Similarly, there is variation in the sign language used by deaf people in urban and rural areas and among various geographical areas. You will also learn that, apart from the deaf, there are some groups of hearing people who use Indian Sign language.

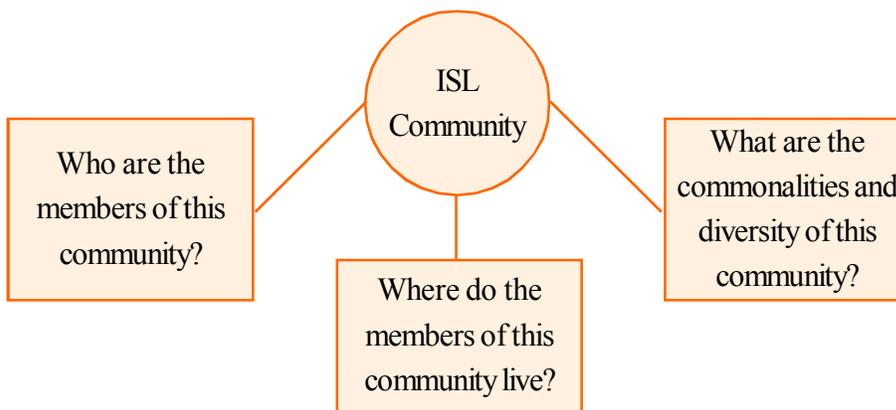


Figure- 4.1 : ISL Community



OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, learner:

- identifies different sub-groups of people in the Indian Sign Language community
- explains the size and structure of this community



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The Community of Indian Sign Language Users, Their Commonalities and Diversity

- compares the situation of rural and urban sign language users and their sign language varieties in India
- demonstrates an awareness of variation and diversity among Indian deaf communities.

4.1 DIFFERENT PATHS TO SIGN LANGUAGE FOR DEAF CHILDREN

- A deaf child born into a hearing non-signing family does not get language input in their early life. They have to wait until they get enrolled in a deaf school and then start learning sign language.
- A deaf child may grow up with oral language, without any sign language input, and then join a deaf association as a young adult. Some deaf people are introduced late to sign language later in life.
- Deaf children with deaf parents or other deaf relatives can learn sign language from birth.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.1

1. How do deaf children with hearing parents learn sign language?
2. Why some deaf people are introduced late to sign language?

4.2 STRUCTURE AND SUB-GROUPS OF THE ISL COMMUNITY

- **Deaf signers:** Within the deaf signing community in India, we have individuals who are from a deaf family with deaf parents or a deaf elder sibling. It is also possible that the family has relatives who are deaf or perhaps a neighbour who is deaf. The deaf child is exposed to sign language input from a very young age and becomes a native user of ISL.

The second largest group of deaf signing individuals are those who have been profoundly deaf since birth or early childhood, and have hearing, non-signing parents. They often join a deaf school and their strong visual skills ensure that they start picking up sign language quickly from the school environment.

We have another sub-group of people who are born hearing and use spoken language for the first years of their lives, until they lose their hearing. Their cognitive processes of language functions are good and they can have near-native fluency in sign language.

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There is yet another group of deaf signers, who learn sign language later in their lives. They may join a deaf school late, or perhaps they are schooled orally and finally meet deaf people outside school. Then, they start learning sign language as teenagers or young adults.

Not all deaf people have the same experiences!

- **Hearing signers:** This group includes:
 - ❖ Parents of deaf children (if they take some ISL training and start using sign language)
 - ❖ People at NGOs, colleges and other institutes linked with the ISL community
 - ❖ Hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs) – they learn sign language as their first language and identify themselves as people with a deep deaf community connection.
 - ❖ Sign language interpreters (some interpreters are CODAs)
 - ❖ Some friends, relatives, neighbors of a deaf person also develop near native fluency in ISL

The ISL community is large and diverse!



INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.2

1. Who is CODA?
2. Who is SODA?

4.3 THE NUMBER OF ISL USERS

It is difficult to know the exact number of ISL users. Why?

The Government of India census 2011:

- ❖ Counts the numbers of people in different groups, for example men and women
- ❖ Counts the numbers of people in spoken language groups
- ❖ Counts persons with disabilities, including deaf BUT: does not count the number of ISL users

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- ❖ Census of India 2011 estimate total deaf population in India as 50 lakhs. Other estimates (for example, by India’s National Association of the Deaf one of the NGOs in Delhi) say there are 18 million deaf people in India.
- It is observed that the number of sign language users in Western countries is decreasing because of advanced medical services, lower rate of birth of deaf child and early cochlear implanting but in India, the number of sign language users is increasing due to higher rate of birth of deaf children, higher population and not enough medical interventions. Also it is only recent that deaf have become more and more aware of their language rights and technology has also helped the deaf to connect with each other through video calling.

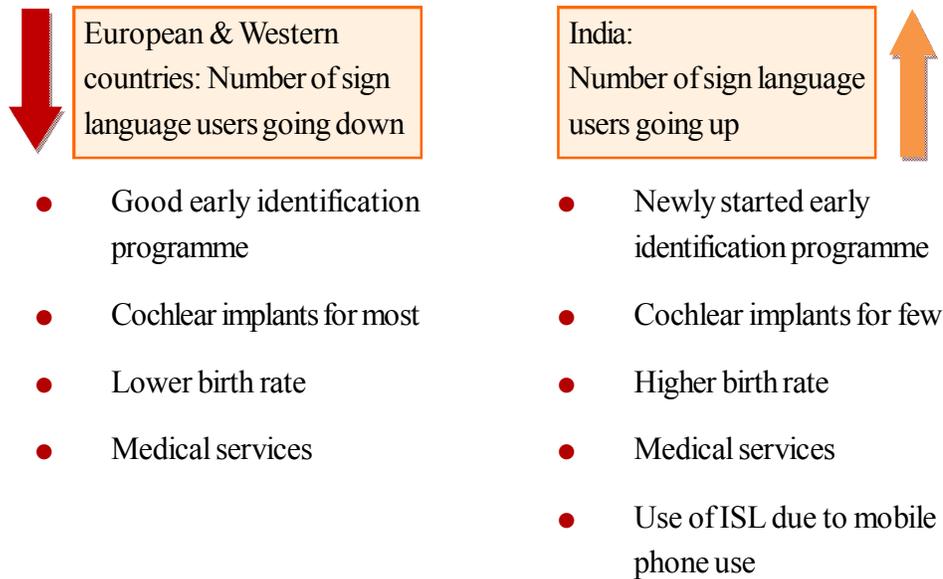


Figure-4.2 : Status of Sign Language users



INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.3

1. Who counts number of deaf people in India?
2. Who said there are 18 million deaf people in India.

4.4 REGIONAL VARIATION IN INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Dialect = Variation of a language linked to its location

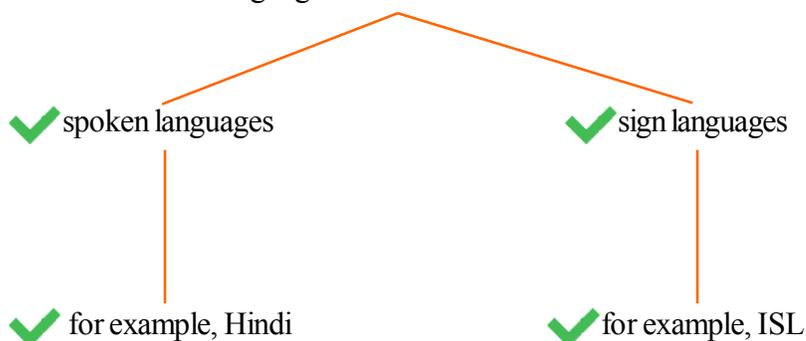


Figure-4.3 : Regional Variation in ISL

Regional variations do not pose communication challenges among deaf people. Researches on regional variation in ISL is documented in the years given below by various researchers.



The above research concluded that:

- About 25% of the lexicon has regional differences
- Mobility, digital communication, and sharing platforms like YouTube changes the effect of regional differences in ISL
- Variation in language, culture and customs is beautiful and accepted



INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.4

1. Variation in language should not be accepted. (True/False)
2. There are 40% variations among ISL dialects. (True/False)

4.5 STANDARDISATION OF ISL

Standardisation of Indian Sign Language

Let us first understand the process of language standardisation.

All languages in the world are split up into a number of dialects. Having dialects is the normal state of all languages. In addition, some languages have a standard form. When



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a standard form of a language develops or is created, this is called language standardisation. Language standardisation can happen as a natural process, and we may also see language policies and language planning for standardisation.

People have different views about language standardisation; some support it for their language and some do not see it as necessary. In any case, it is important to understand how language standardisation can happen. So let us look at a few questions.

Can we standardise a language by creating a dictionary?

The answer is no. Language standardisation is not a product. Creating a language resource such as a dictionary does not mean that we have standardised a language. Instead, language standardisation is a process that takes time. It can take any time between one generation and hundreds of years for a language to evolve a standardised variety.

Do dialects die out when a standard language has evolved?

Again, the answer is no. Even after successful evolution of a standard variety, dialects do not automatically disappear. They usually continue to be used alongside the standard variety. Most people just become fluent in two language varieties, their own dialect and the standard variety.

Is it enough to declare officially that a language has become standardised?

No. Standardisation of a language does not happen by simply declaring something to be a standard. When a standard variety evolves, the language community adopts new linguistic practices and habits to use the standard. Without the language community, top-down declarations have no effect.

How can language standardisation actually happen?

The success of language standardisation efforts depends on two important factors, which are the same for spoken languages and sign languages:

1. Speakers/signers of the language must have ACCESS to the standard variety. If people do not know what the standard forms are, they cannot use them. People will use the standard forms only if they see them frequently at school, in teaching materials, in stories, on television, and so on. The standard variety must be an actually existing variety, not an artificial collection without natural users.

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2. Speakers/signers must have the MOTIVATION to use the standard variety. If people know the potential standard forms but do not want to use them, the standard will not spread. People may adopt forms as a standard if there are some role models (at school, on television, on popular videos, etc.) so that they feel motivated to imitate the role models' use of the variety. The more popular the material is that people can access, the more motivated they will be to adopt a potential standard variety.

Access to a language variety and motivation to use it means that people may accept this variety as a standard over time. Without acceptance by the language community, standardisation will not happen. This is because the living language of a community is made from millions of linguistic interactions between people that cannot be controlled. Acceptance can be improved by supporting the aspirations of the language community, for example, widespread access to quality materials in the language.

Standardisation of sign languages: Comparing different situations

The Netherlands

Standardisation of sign language in connection with language policy was done in the Netherlands. The deaf community and researchers put in years of effort to document Sign Language of the Netherlands in the country.

A standard form of sign language was linked to official recognition of the sign language. The Netherlands is a very small country with a small deaf population, and language policy is easier to manage on a small scale.

India

As far as Indian Sign Language (ISL) is concerned, it currently has no official status (e.g. as a scheduled language) and insufficient official recognition, while the deaf community in India is very large, with millions of sign language users. National Education Policy, 2020 recommends that the Indian Sign Language (ISL) will be standardised across the country, and National and State curriculum materials developed, for use by learners with hearing impairment.

Indian Sign Language has no written form, so the spread of potential standard forms would have to happen through other media, notably via videos on television and the internet, as well as face to face communication.

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Dissemination of standard varieties is usually closely linked with formal education. However, most schools for the deaf in India are still not using Indian Sign Language for education, so they will not be able to support a sign language standardisation process. This can only happen when education through sign language becomes widely available.

For the Indian Deaf Community, use of sign language in education, wide dissemination and availability of high-quality materials in ISL, and official recognition of ISL are matters of priority.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.5**

1. What are the main challenges to Standardisation of ISL as per your opinion? Write at least three points?
2. In which country, standardisation was done through a policy and adopted?

4.6 WORKING WITH ISL DIALECTS

The organic way is to have continuous education and training in ISL, including different dialects. As schools, organisations, and print and digital media continue to promote ISL content, there will be more uniformity over time. Full standardisation cannot be guaranteed, but this is a natural process.

Dialects are a beautiful part of language, and increase the richness of ISL. Deaf people frequently communicate across dialects. For example, travelling to Gujarat and learning their signs for days of the week are a nice experience. Natural dialects should be allowed to blossom.

Examples of regional signs:

- Days of the week
- Colours
- Months of the year
- Food



INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.6

- i. Not all deaf have same experience (True/False)
- ii. ISL community is small (True/False)
- iii. CODA have deaf parents (True/False)
- iv. ISL has no regional variation (True/False)
- v. All deaf understand spoken languages (True/False)
- vi. Hearing parents of Deaf know ISL (True/False)



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Not all the deaf have the same experience sign language with and there are many sub-groups of sign language users.
- Many deaf children are born to hearing parents. These deaf children can only learn sign language when they enroll in a special school for the deaf which can take as long as late as 8-9 years.
- Some deaf children study in regular schools where only speech is used to teach and do not get exposure to proper Indian Sign Language until they join a deaf club or an association which could be as late as adulthood.
- Deaf kids born to deaf signing parents or in a family with an older signing deaf sibling or relative acquire sign language as their mother tongue and are native signers of ISL.
- There are other deaf people who are born hearing and develop a spoken language but lose their hearing later. These people may also become part of the sign language community.
- There are some hearing people too who use sign language. These include hearing children born to deaf parents (known as CODAs), hearing siblings of deaf persons (SODAs), parents of deaf children who learn sign language for better communication with their deaf child and then there are Interpreters who learn



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sign language for professional purpose. As a result, the sign language using community is large and diverse.

- Because there is no census data collected on ISL users, it is difficult to know the exact number of sign language users in India. Estimates are very different from one to another.
- It is observed that the number of sign language users in Western countries is going down because of advanced medical services, a lower birth rate of deaf people and early cochlear implanting but in India, the number of sign language users is increasing as it is only recently that deaf people have become more and more aware of their language rights and technology has also helped the deaf connect with each other through video calling.
- Like in spoken languages, there are regional variations known as dialects of Indian Sign language. Language research showed that the grammar is same but there is around 25% variation in the vocabulary of ISL in different regions of India.
- With greater mobility and use of social media platforms variations in ISL used across India is becoming less but regional differences based on culture and customs is beautiful and need respect.
- Standardization of ISL is a debatable issue and there are arguments for and against it. Creating one standard ISL including regional variations would be a huge task as India is a very big country.
- Most deaf people are not pro standardization of ISL but govt. is keen on this issue and has started the process. Otherwise, as ISL use and promotion through different media especially digital media for different purposes like education, entertainment and information increase, as a natural process some uniformity of signing across country is bound to happen.
- Regional variation in signs is usually found in the signs of Days of the week, Colours, Months of the year and signs related to food.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. 'All deaf children learn sign language from their parents' – is this true or false? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What is a CODA?
3. 'ISL should be standardised, so that all deaf people in India use the same signs' – do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. For each category, give a specific example of something that is signed differently in ISL in two different regions. (For example, 'Monday' is signed differently in Delhi vs Gujarat.)
 - a. Colour signs
 - b. Food signs
 - c. Calendar/date signs (days or months)

Long Questions

1. Describe ISL community.
2. What do you think about standardization of ISL. Express your views?
3. Is there any risk of ISL standardization? What's your view?
4. What do you think about working with ISL dialects?



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

4.1

1. A deaf child with hearing parents has to wait until they get enrolled in a deaf school and start Learning ISL.
2. Many deaf children with hearing parents are exposed to sign language later in life, mostly after entering a school for the deaf. In such situations, they lack immediate sign language exposure following birth, and it becomes reason for a late introduction to sign language for them.

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4.2

1. Child of Deaf Adult
2. Sibling of Deaf Adult

4.4

1. False
2. False