

A Lexical Comparison of Tajik Sign Language and Afghan Sign Language

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Researchers have compared the vocabularies of a range of the world's sign languages in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, leading to tentative family groupings based on lexical similarity (e.g. Woodward 1978, 1991, 1993, 2011; McKee & Kennedy 2000). Little is known, however, about the relationships amongst sign languages in Central Asia, where deaf education programs have short histories and signed language has only recently received scholarly attention. The geographically closest lexical comparisons are Woodward's (1993) investigation of sign varieties in the south Asian subcontinent as far west as Karachi, Pakistan, and Al-Fityani & Padden's (2008) and Hendriks' (2008) comparisons of sign languages in the Arab world as far east as Jordan.

In this paper, I explore the historical relationships of Tajik Sign Language (TSL) and Afghan Sign Language (AFSL), two understudied Central Asian languages. I conduct a phylogenetic network analysis of basic vocabulary from four TSL signers and AFSL, as well as two foreign sign languages with which deaf Tajiks and Afghans have had contact, namely, Russian Sign Language (RSL) in Tajikistan and American Sign Language (ASL) in Afghanistan. The results of the network analysis are presented in Figure 1. The main topological features of the graph are (i) the split separating AFSL and ASL from TSL and RSL; and (ii) the clustering of RSL and the TSL signers on one side of the main split compared to the bifurcation of AFSL and ASL on the other.

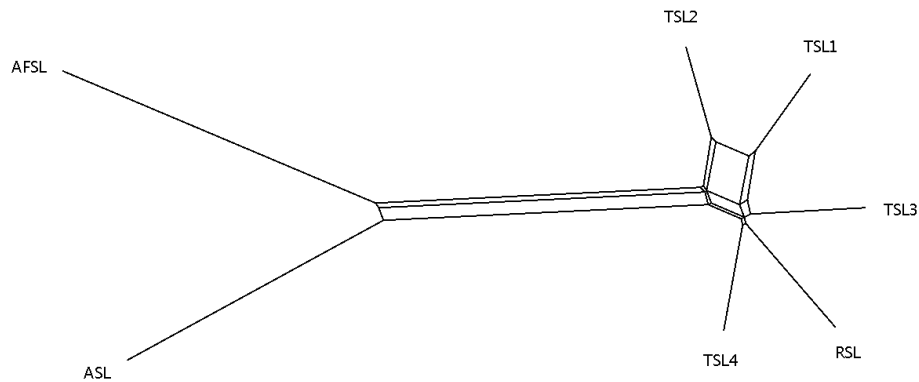


Figure 1. Phylogenetic network for four TSL signers, AFSL, ASL, and RSL

Concerning the first split, the findings of this study provide little basis for positing a phylogenetic link between TSL and AFSL based on a common Central Asian ancestor, as the main split in the graph clearly separates AFSL and ASL from RSL and TSL. As regards the second, I argue that the difference between the configuration of TSL and RSL on the one hand and AFSL and ASL on the other is suggestive of different contact situations. The clustering of TSL and RSL reflects the strong influence of RSL in Tajikistan for nearly six decades at a time when Russians were politically and socially dominant, from the opening of the first school for the deaf in Rudaki (then Leninsky) south of Dushanbe in 1940 until several years after Tajik independence. In contrast, deaf Afghans were in contact with ASL in Afghanistan for less than five years in the first half of the 1990s in one influential vocational training project among Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan, and the influence of ASL on AFSL is limited.

Finally, I explore the question of how to characterize the relationship of TSL to RSL and AFSL to ASL. I discuss parallels to Mufwene's (2001, 2008) conception of language diversification through contact and shift with respect to the situations in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. I suggest that the results of this study are indicative of the influence of deaf educational institutions in the formation of signing communities and in the conventionalization of sign language.

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