

Eyeblinks, prosody, and mobilizing sign language documentation

Samantha Rarrick (Griffith University)

Blinking while signing is similar to breathing while speaking. Both are biological functions which must occur frequently, but they have also been incorporated into language. While language users are rarely conscious of their breathing or blinking patterns, there are places where it is natural to take these quick breaks and other places where it is awkward.

Previous literature has shown that eyeblinks in sign languages contribute to prosody and exhibit language-specific patterns (Brentari 1998; Sze 2008; Tang et al. 2010; Herrmann 2010; Pfau 2016). Drawing on data from the existing corpus of Hawai'i Sign Language (HSL), I am investigating eyeblink and other prosodic patterns in this critically endangered isolate language (Lambrecht et al. 2013; Rarrick & Lambrecht 2016). Mobilizing the existing documentation allows this research to rely on more naturalistic language use, but it also presents specific challenges that reveal important considerations for language documentation currently. Findings to date suggest that HSL exhibits longer durations of eyeblink suppression than other sign languages. In this seminar, key insights into the nature of prosodic and non-prosodic eyeblinks in HSL will be discussed, alongside discussion of considerations for language documentation and the future of eyeblink research across disciplines.

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Bio

Samantha Rarrick is a Lecturer in Linguistics at Griffith University. Sam's research incorporates community language work and spans across language documentation, language description, and typology. She holds a PhD and MA in Linguistics from the University of Hawai'i. Her interest in community language work was sparked during her BA in Linguistics at the University of New Mexico and developed further as she worked with signers of Hawai'i Sign Language (HSL) and speakers of

Kere (Sinasin-Yongomugl, Chimbu, PNG) during her graduate programs. In 2016, while undertaking fieldwork for her PhD thesis on tonal phonology of Kere, Sam met a Deaf Kere woman. This paved the way for her National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship (Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences) which documented signing in the Sinasina Valley for the first time. Since coming to Australia in 2019, she continues to work with minority language users who live locally and to revisit the corpora she manages for further analysis. Her current research topics include verbal morphology in Bipi (Austronesian); prosody in HSL and Sinasina Sign Language; and typologies of non-manual mouth movements across sign languages. In response to COVID-19 restrictions, Sam has maintained long-distance connections with Kere people in PNG and aims to return to the community soon. She has also been developing a partnership with staff at Gidarjil Central Queensland Language Centre in Bundaberg to support community language work locally.