An examination of the identity, culture and language of the Deaf gay male community in Britain

I first started researching Gay Sign Variation (GSV) in 2008 with the aim of establishing how much, if any, the articulation of signs used in the Deaf gay community differ from that of BSL. This was examined from both a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective drawing parallels from research previously conducted (Kleinfeld and Warner 1996; Rudner and Botowsky 1981; Beck and Hesselberg 1995) with a variation found in American Sign Language (ASL) and features recorded in British Sign Language (BSL).

Establishing what GSV is and how it fits into the larger Deaf community and establishing the role that GSV might play within the community provides us with further knowledge on a sub-culture which exists within the wider Deaf community. Understanding the notion that there may be a sub-culture within a culture then helps to understand if the Deaf gay community would label themselves as a sub-culture.

GSV, like spoken language gay variety, is deemed to be used covertly, is signed rather than written and quite possibly originated in a time when access to video recording was limited. For those reasons, one may assume that there is little documented and archived material available on which to basis a study. This would be the correct assumption. However, some documents were found in existence on the topic; some from the United States focus on the lexicon of their GSV (Kleinfeld and Warner 1996; Rudner and Botowsky 1981) and one from the United Kingdom (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) which analysed the features of GSV. No research had been conducted into the link between GSV and identity as a Deaf gay person until the interviews conducted for the purposes of my research.

My presentation will explain the eight BSL signs that I analysed and compared to GSV, with the aim of confirming or refuting its classification as a variation of BSL. In addition, I will outline the defining factors for inclusion to the Deaf gay community along with Deaf gay culture, Deaf gay identity and the recognition and management of multiple identities. Finally, I will explain the complexity of relationships in the Deaf gay community.

References available on request.