A Signers’ Village in Bali, Indonesia

Connie de Vos
University of Central Lancashire, UK

Bengkala is not marked on most maps, and even in the nearest city, Singaraja, few people know of the village or the extraordinary situation that obtains there. In Bengkala, 2.2% of the villagers are deaf. This level of incidence is extremely high when compared with, for example, the USA, where less than 0.1% of children are born with a severe hearing impairment. Deafness in Bengkala is caused by a recessive gene that is widespread in the village population. The gene (known as DFNB33) appears to cause shortened hair cells in the cochlea and profound deafness as a result, and there are no known other characteristics that set deaf individuals apart from the other villagers. There are at present forty-eight deaf signers in a village of little more than 2,000 inhabitants.

A striking feature here is that a sign language has emerged that is used by both deaf and hearing members of the community. Deaf villagers use signs to communicate with their hearing relatives, as well as many of their hearing friends and colleagues, and approximately two thirds of Bengkala’s hearing population can understand and use this indigenous sign language with varying degrees of proficiency. For the reasons stated above, the Balinese refer to Bengkala as Desa Kolok — which is Balinese for ‘deaf village’ — and its sign language as Kolok ‘deaf talk’. Kolok currently functions in all major aspects of village life including politics, gossip, Hindu ceremonies, as well as education.*

The socio-cultural construction of deafness in Bengkala

Deaf individuals and fluent hearing signers are found in all ten village clans. In daily life, therefore, the deaf individuals of Bengkala will not often face someone unwilling or unable to communicate with them in sign.

Presumably because of the use of a shared sign language, deaf individuals are well-integrated into the wider hearing community. The integration of deaf villagers is mirrored by the fact that they have equal chances of getting married and have similar professional opportunities. Deaf villagers also occupy crucial offices within the village including water pump operators and care and burial of the dead. In fact, the kolok men are often characterised as particularly strong yet sensitive, and dominate the village’s civil defense brigade for this reason. Interestingly, the community has developed unique socio-cultural adaptations to
deafness including a shared belief in Bhutanera Kolok — a deaf God. On special occasions, the deaf villagers are also known to perform the Jarajur Kolok — a deaf dance — which is cued exclusively by a visual beat.

Endangerment of Kata Kolok

In recent years, many deaf teenagers from Bengkala have attended the deaf boarding school in Jimbaran, in the south of Bali. These adolescents have become fluent in either Signed Indonesian Sign Language and Kata Kolok, and such contact situations often result in linguistic change in favor of the majority language, which is associated with perceived educational and professional opportunities. Attendance at this deaf boarding school has also resulted in increased contact between the Kata Kolok community and the large Deaf Community of Bali, resulting in changing marital patterns. The intensification of contact between the Kata Kolok signers and Indonesian Sign Language has resulted in an increasing number of deaf individuals from Bengkala seeking out deaf spouses from surrounding villages and other parts of Bali. Because deaf individuals outside of Bengkala are not carriers of the identical recessive gene causing deafness, these couples are unlikely to have deaf offspring.

This latter tendency, to marry outside the village, is also observed in hearing villagers from Bengkala, due to socio-economic change. These changing marital patterns dilute the frequency of the recessive gene in the population of Bengkala, and the incidence of deafness as a result. When the number of deaf individuals decreases significantly, the community loses need for the sign language, which is likely to disappear. Since 2005, no deaf children have been born to parents with Kata Kolok, and this makes the study of the acquisition of Kata Kolok especially pressing as an opportunity to study the acquisition of this endangered sign language without the influence of Indonesian Sign Language may soon decline.

The Kata Kolok corpus

In response to these recent developments, the author has created a corpus — a digital archive — of Kata Kolok, which is maintained jointly by

The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijenrode and the international institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies in Preston (UK). The Kata Kolok corpus currently comprises 100 hours of high-quality video data. Translations in Indonesian and English make sections of this corpus accessible to a national and international academic audience. During field trips spanning one year, the video recordings targeted core functional domains in which the language is used. A sub-corpus of spontaneous conversational data includes informal group conversations among deaf and hearing villagers as well as culturally entrenched monologues such as stories of deaf ghost and Balinese cock fights. A special section of the Kata Kolok corpus charted the development of two deaf toddlers growing up in deaf families over the course of two years. In light of the language’s endangered status, further documentation efforts are specifically planned to continue with this latest generation of Kata Kolok signers.

*Kata Kolok is used as a language of instruction, was set-up at the initiative of the author in collaboration with local authorities in mid-2007.