

Philippine Signed Languages Survey:

A Rapid Appraisal

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CONTENTS

1.0 THE DEAF

1.1 THE DEAF OF THE PHILIPPINES

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.0 THE SURVEY TRIP

6.0 METHODOLOGY

7.0 OTHER SIGNED LANGUAGES

8.0 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

8.2 INTERPRETATION CRITERIA

Table 1. Comparisons of scores for Filipino Sign Language

Abbreviations in Chart

REG VII Region VII

REG VIII Region VIII

9.0 CONCLUSION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abstract

This report concerns a 2004–2005 survey of the signed languages in the Philippines. Wordlists and stories were collected from some of the major cities where there are schools for the Deaf. In some cities Deaf had come from many outlying provinces, so wordlists were collected from them at the college or at the hostel where they were staying. As a result of those contacts, it was not deemed necessary to go to every area of the country to collect data. The data gathered seemed to be representative of the various sign language varieties that exist, with the exception of parts of the far southwest. Wordlists and stories were collected from each of the places visited. The wordlists were transcribed by hand using the SignWriting orthography.

The survey revealed only two signed languages in the country: Filipino Sign Language (FSL) and Samar Sign Language. The latter is a village sign language used by the Deaf and some of the hearing residents in San Julian on the east coast of Samar Island.

0. INTRODUCTION

The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) contains a comprehensive listing of the world's languages as far as they are known, including more than one hundred signed languages. Only one sign language is listed for the Philippines, called either Philippine Sign Language or Filipino Sign Language (FSL). As the latter is the one preferred by the Deaf¹ of the Philippines, it is the designation used in this paper.²

The history of the Deaf in the Philippines goes back to Spanish times. In 1596 Fr. Raymundo de Prado recorded the fact that Deaf people were signing. The sign language used in those days probably still has traces in present-day Filipino Sign Language. When the United States began governing the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, American Sign Language (ASL) was introduced in the schools for the Deaf, and present-day FSL is heavily influenced by ASL.

1.0 THE DEAF

The Deaf in any people group comprise from one to three individuals in every 1000 births (Parkhurst, 1997). Most Deaf children (more than 90%) are born into families where both parents are hearing (Mitchell, 2005). These children have no way to learn a language either spoken or signed. They do not learn to speak because they cannot hear, and they do not learn to sign because there is no one to teach them. Most deaf worldwide grow up without any language. The family will often develop a few rudimentary signs, called “home signs,” but a sign language does not occur in isolation.

Usually, Deaf children learn a signed language in school. The few Deaf children who are born into Deaf families will usually learn the sign language of their parents in the normal

¹Some years ago the convention was started of using upper case Deaf to refer to those who are hearing impaired, use sign language, and consider themselves to be part of a community of Deaf people. Lower case deaf refers to the hearing impaired, often older people, who are more comfortable in the hearing world (Woodward 1982).

²*Filipino Sign Language* (2005) is the title chosen for an important dictionary published by the Philippine Federation of the Deaf. The spelling of the title was decided by a group of Deaf leaders after much debate on whether to write it as Philippine or Filipino.

way that hearing children learn from their parents. If there are a group of deaf children in a school where no sign language is taught, the children will develop a sign language in a few years. For example, note that this is how Penang Sign Language developed in Malaysia in the 1950s to 1970s (Hurlbut 2000), and this is also how Nicaraguan Sign Language is currently developing in Nicaragua (Osborne 1999).

Deaf children who have been to school do not necessarily learn to read the language they are taught in school. Most, if not all, written languages are based to some extent on the sound system of that language. Since the Deaf child cannot hear the sounds of the written language, he has no way to decipher how it should be spoken or what the symbols on the page mean. He must memorize every word individually, as if he were memorizing a series of telephone numbers. It is not surprising then that an average Deaf high school graduate in a developed country usually has a reading level of about grade 4 (primary 4). In many other countries Deaf children who have completed school very soon lapse into illiteracy again.

1.1 THE DEAF OF THE PHILIPPINES

Deaf children in the Philippines are more fortunate than most Deaf children in third world countries in that the government and some NGOs have undertaken to provide education for them. Some of the schools for the Deaf are residential for children coming from a distance.

The education department has encouraged the use of sign language in the various schools in the country.

Filipino Sign Language is a signed language that is mostly based on American Sign Language, which was introduced into the country after the Spanish-American War ended in 1899. The first school was started for the Deaf and Blind about 1907 by Miss Delight Rice. At first, parents were reluctant to allow their children to study, so she had to look for students for the school. Eventually the school grew, and additional schools for the Deaf were set up in different locations.

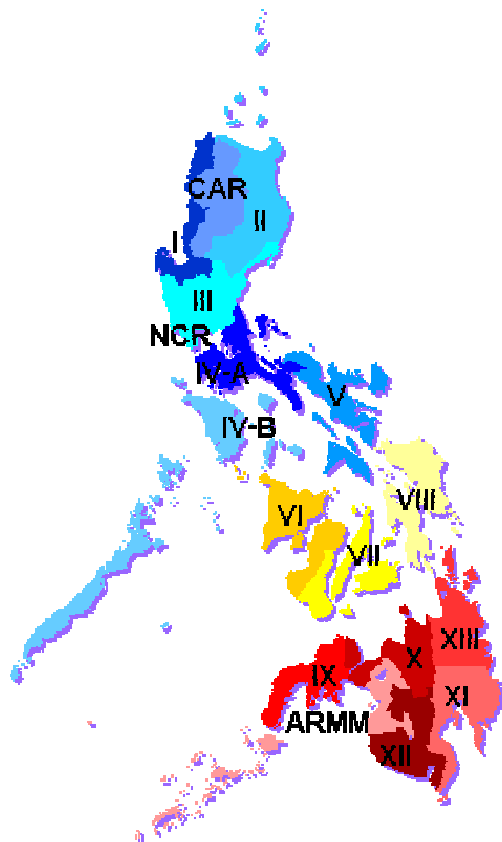
There are now about thirty elementary schools which have classes for Deaf children. Some of them are exclusively for Deaf children, whereas some are mixed with handicapped children with various disabilities. These schools have elementary classes from grades 1–6. In addition ten or more secondary schools consist of four years of education, and some Bible Institutes are wholly or partially for Deaf students. At the tertiary level there are classes for the Deaf in at least ten colleges, institutes and universities, and two of these are exclusively for Deaf students. Some of the tertiary institutions grant degrees up to the MA level.

There are at least thirty training and vocational centres for Deaf and disabled run by churches, other private groups and foundations, and another fourteen under government sponsorship. These are mostly geared to training adults.

Some of the schools use the oral approach, that is, they try to teach the children to speak and read lips. This is a difficult task for profoundly deaf children who cannot hear the spoken word, but it is less of a problem for the hard of hearing children. The schools that we visited all used the Total Communication approach. This consists of teaching lip-reading, vocalization for the students who are suitable, and signing. Most of the signing in the classroom is Signing Exact English. Outside the classroom, the older students at least

signed using Filipino Sign Language and some Filipino signs that have been handed down through generations of Deaf in the Philippines, as well as many new signs, especially those dealing with technology (Apurado and Agravante 2006).

In 1994 a World Conference on Special Needs Education was convened in Salamanca, Spain. At that conference a statement was adopted known as “The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994).” Section 21 on educational policies for the Deaf stressed “the importance of sign language as the medium of communication among the deaf,” saying that it “should be recognized and provision made to ensure that all deaf persons have access to education in their national sign language.”³ Bustos and Tanjusay (2006) comment on the statement as follows, “The Philippines is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) which states the importance of sign language as the medium of communication among the deaf, prescribing the recognition of a natural sign language and deaf peoples’ access to education in their language.” Interestingly, the quotation uses “natural” rather than “national” showing the importance of their own natural sign language to these Filipino Deaf authors.



REGIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES

- Region I (Ilocos Region)
- CAR (Cordillera Administrative Region)
- Region II (Cagayan Valley)
- Region III (Central Luzon)
- NCR (National Capital Region)
- Region IV-A (CALABARZON)
- Region IV-B (MIMAROPA)
- Region V (Bicol Region)
- Region VI (Western Visayas)
- Region VII (Central Visayas)
- Region VIII (Eastern Visayas)
- Region IX (Zamboanga Peninsula)
- Region X (Northern Mindanao)
- Region XI (Davao Region)
- Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN)
- Region XIII (Caraga)
- ARMM (Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao)

³Educational policies should take full account of individual differences and situations. The importance of sign language as the medium of communication among the deaf, for example, should be recognized and provision made to ensure that all deaf persons have access to education in their national sign language. Owing to the particular communication needs of deaf and deaf/blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools.

The Philippine Federation of the Deaf in conjunction with the Philippine Deaf Resource Center, both located in Manila, have produced resources for the Deaf and interested hearing individuals, including a dictionary, and some grammar books on FSL. One task they are engaged in is documenting the variations in FSL in different Regions. Each Region has an association for the Deaf which usually has about ten to twenty members.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to gain an initial impression of what variety, or varieties, of sign language used in the Philippines might be most useful as a medium in which to create literature that communicates well for all Filipino Deaf.

My purpose differs from those creating the dictionary in that I want to discover how well people understand each other despite their dialectal differences.

Over a number of years I have had occasion to attend workshops and meetings in the Philippines. After I began to learn American Sign Language (ASL), I took the opportunity of meeting the Deaf in Manila on my trips there. From time to time I kept hearing about differences between the way the Deaf signed in various places. I kept in mind that survey was needed to determine if the signing was so different that people in separate places would not understand each other well and if language development was needed in more than one place.

Since Filipino Sign Language has been influenced by ASL, one of the main questions was, "Are FSL and ASL two dialects of the same language, or are they related but separate languages?"

3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper addresses the following questions:

1. How many varieties of FSL are there in the Philippines? Is there one variety of FSL that is understood by all the Deaf?
2. In comparing the FSL wordlists with the ASL list, are they clearly the same or clearly different? Will further research be needed?
3. What are the attitudes of the signers to their own language and to other language varieties?

4.0 APPROACH

In the survey, the principal tools I used were to ask questions and video record people showing me the sign they use for a given word in a standard list. The list of words chosen was basically the same list that was developed by the participants in the Sign Language courses at the University of North Dakota in 2002.

The lists of words elicited from different people in different places were compared using a method to be described below.

It is difficult to determine what the percentages of similarities mean when comparing the wordlists, but I think it is safe to conclude that for the comparison method I am using if the percentage of similarities between the wordlists from two cities is greater than 85 percent,

this indicates that these lists represent two varieties of the same sign language. However, if the results show percentages below 60 percent, we are probably dealing with different languages and the signers would not really understand each other. The same is true in comparing ASL and FSL.

If the results of the wordlist comparisons fall between 60 percent and 85 percent, further research would be necessary to determine the need for language development in the signing community.

The attitudes of the signing community are sometimes an important factor in determining the need for language development, and they may override the conclusions based merely on wordlist percentages.

5.0 THE SURVEY TRIP

My first opportunity to video Filipino Sign Language was at an international conference in Bali in 2003. I had brought along my camera and videoed a Deaf Filipino man from Laguna there.

In 2004, I met a couple at a workshop who were working with the Deaf in Legaspi. Following the workshop I accompanied them to Legaspi to video some of the Deaf there. I was able to video several adults who signed the wordlist for me. In addition to the wordlist each of them was asked to sign a story. Later I was also able to video a Deaf teacher from Manila.

In 2005, I needed to find a suitable Deaf companion to accompany me on further survey trips. I was introduced to a Deaf lady by the name of Gilda Quintua. She was willing to help in the survey and as it turned out that she was uniquely qualified as she had Deaf contacts in all parts of the Philippines as well as overseas. She took me as a “client” under her company “M.G.L.Q. Deaf Tour, Philippines.” As a tour operator she wrote letters of introduction for me to all the people that we would contact in the various Regions⁴ of the country. Her letters meant that doors opened to us easily to find the people we needed to video and get the information we needed.

While waiting for Gilda to be free for the survey work, some friends took me to Lucena as they had met some Deaf there previously. After much searching we found a number of Deaf in one house and I was able to video three Deaf there, two of whom lived locally and one of whom was from Manila.

It had been decided that Gilda and I would try to video two people from each Region of the Philippines, as there seemed to be at least one Deaf school in each Region. We travelled to Davao, Cebu City, Baguio, Cabanatuan, Leyte, and Samar. In several places we were able to video Deaf college students from other Regions where we had intended to go, with the result that we cancelled our trips to the other places. The ideal was to video two people, preferably one male and one female from each Region. There are sixteen regions in the Philippines, plus the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). We were not able to go to Region IX or the ARMM because of the peace and order situation, nor could

⁴The Philippines is divided into a number of Regions, and each Region has a number of provinces. It was decided to use the capital of each Region as the centre in which to collect data on the varieties of sign language as there is usually a school for the Deaf located in each provincial capital.

we find any Deaf from those regions in Manila or elsewhere, though I was told that they have their own sign language.

When we reached the main city of a Region we would go to a school for the Deaf or to a college where Gilda knew there were Deaf students. Some of the Deaf schools and colleges have a hostel for the out-of-town students. In those places it was easy to contact someone through whom we could get the names of suitable candidates for videoing.

Altogether we collected twenty-seven wordlists from fourteen regions, including the lists collected in 2003 and 2004.

6.0 METHODOLOGY

In videoing the Deaf we used a two-part wordlist (See Hurlbut 2007). Part 1 consists of 111 pictures of items, such as animals, food items, implements, vehicles, people, and a few verbs. Part 2 consists of items that are difficult to picture. There are 138 written words in English, such as terms for nature, adjectives (including some opposites), some nouns that are difficult to draw, some verbs, etc. The reason that English is used is that it is the main language taught in the schools for the Deaf. To make elicitation more natural, related items are arranged in categories where possible.

In each place visited, one or more Deaf signed the words on the wordlist, and these were videotaped using a camcorder and 8 mm. videotapes. After that, he or she was asked to sign a personal story about some incident that had happened to him or her.

In comparing the wordlists, I look at various parameters of the signs (Liddell and Johnson 1989), the handshape, orientation, location, contact, movement, and non-manuals.⁵ If two of these parameters are identical, then probably the sign is similar on the two lists, but I weight the parameters of the sign differently.

1. Handshape: This seemed to be the most important criterion, as often a change in handshape only will change the meaning of a sign, especially for signed languages that use a lot of initialization, as Filipino Sign Language (FSL) does.
2. Location: The location of a sign seemed to be quite important, so was ranked higher than some other parameters. Signs on the head and face were given a heavier weighting than those made farther from the head, when deciding on similarities or differences between different forms of the signs.
3. Movement: Movement seems to be somewhat less important in signed languages than handshape, but the movement can also carry a lot of weight for some signs.
4. Orientation: Orientation refers to the direction of the palm of the hand that can face up or down, forward or backward, or on an angle. For certain signs the orientation is crucial. (In American Sign Language, “children” is signed with the palm facing down, but the handshape and movement are the same as for “thing” where the palm faces up.) Sometimes

⁵Non-manuals include facial expressions, eye movement, eyebrow movement, mouth movements, etc., as well as head movements and body movements, such as twisting or tilting the body.

orientation does not seem to matter, especially the orientation of the non-dominant or base hand.

5. Contact: The presence or absence of contact and the kind of contact was taken into consideration only if it seemed important for that particular sign.

6. Non-manual signals (NMS): Very few signs seemed dependent on non-manual signals, since many of the respondents only used them for a few signs, such as smile, angry, sour, etc. For those particular signs, of course, the NMS were considered important in evaluating the sameness or differences when comparing signs.

7. Number of hands: Usually the use of one or two hands was not significant. If there was some doubt about whether the signs were similar or not, the fact that one or two hands were used was taken into account.

There are nearly always one or more signs on a list that are questionable as to similarity with signs on another list, but they are always very few.

7.0 OTHER SIGNED LANGUAGES

My language assistant, Gilda Quintua, is one of four in her family who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Unlike most Deaf children she was fortunate enough to be born in a village on Samar Island where a number of Deaf already had developed a sign language among themselves, called Samar Sign Language, so she had the advantage of learning language at an early age. Eventually her family moved to the southern part of Luzon Island, where she and the other Deaf children in the family went to a school for the Deaf where they learned Filipino Sign Language. There are around twenty Deaf in San Julian on Samar Island, including those in the Quintua family. Their language is unique, and does not seem to be related to other signed languages.

Later, after the survey was completed, I learned that some of the Quintua family have started to teach FSL to the other Samar signers.

8.0 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Gilda and I travelled to the different Regions of the Philippines to collect wordlists of the various forms of signing. In each Region we tried to get two to four wordlists from Deaf who were born in that Region and went to school there. Occasionally we were able to get wordlists from Deaf who came from neighbouring Regions to go to college or find employment. A couple of Regions only had one representative who could be videoed. In the end, because of time constraints, we did not get a second wordlist from those Regions.

The wordlists were transcribed using an orthography called SignWriting (Sutton, 1999).

8.1 ANALYSIS OF THE WORDLISTS

In comparing the signs in different wordlists, those that were identical were marked as such, and those that were similar had their own category. For the final comparisons these two groups were combined into one. The reason for having a category of “identical” was in case questions arose of whether certain signs were really similar, the ones that were marked

“identical” did not need to be revisited. The criteria for analyzing signs as the same or similar were based on the categories listed in Section 6.0. They are ranked in order of importance as defined by the author.⁶

In deciding whether two signs were similar or not, a minimum of two parameters had to be the same. For example, if the handshape of the dominant hand and the movement were the same in the two signs, they were regarded as similar, even if only one hand was used instead of two hands. However, if the handshape was similar, but not identical, and the movement was also similar, but not identical, then the use of one or two hands became an important factor in deciding similarity. For example, “cat” was considered different in one set of comparisons, because the handshape, movement, and orientation were all a bit different, even though the sign was in the same location. Differences in the non-dominant hand were sometimes ignored, especially an open or closed thumb as those handshapes are considered to be allophones.

A working assumption was that everyone living in the same Region would know all the signs used by those from whom I was eliciting the words. Thus, when comparing two Regions with each other, if a sign from one subject was the same or similar to any one of the signs from another Region, the two were counted as similar for that item. Often there were clear regional differences in the way the Deaf signed certain items. Sometimes all the subjects would sign an English word using exactly the same sign, and those in a different Region would also sign exactly alike, but the signs used in one Region were quite different from those in the other.

8.2 INTERPRETATION CRITERIA

Steve and Diane Parkhurst (1997) hypothesized the following criteria for evaluating the results of wordlist comparisons.

Lexical Similarity

0–40%	=	different language family
40–60%	=	different language, same language family
60–70%	=	likely to be considered a separate language but intelligibility testing is necessary
70–80%	=	unable to determine if same or different language; intelligibility testing is necessary
80–95%	=	same language, different dialect; intelligibility testing necessary to determine how distinct the dialects are
95–100%	=	same or very similar dialects of the same language

In a follow-up communication, Steve Parkhurst (2007) had this comment.

I would still say that basically this is true. I would say that if similarity is above 80 percent, it's not really necessary to do intelligibility testing—unless you have anecdotal data saying that there is some possible miscommunication or some other issue that makes things harder to understand. I would still say that for most lists that have less than 60 percent similarity, you're going to need an adaptation. The 60–80 range is the big "iffy range" and needs more testing.

⁶Others have used slightly different ranking.

Albert Bickford (2007, personal communications) was not quite so definite, but had this to say:

Most of the studies I've seen tend to come up with similarity figures around 85–100 percent for two wordlists from the same language, and around 10–40 percent for two unrelated languages. So, if two samples score in the 30–65 percent range, I'd say there is likelihood they've had some historical contact (not necessarily genetic, it might be borrowing or creolization), but they are probably not mutually intelligible. I'd expect that other factors would lead us to conclude that they are separate languages, and unless there is anecdotal evidence that they may be dialects of the same language, I'd just assume they are distinct languages and not test further. Between about 60 percent and 90 percent, I'd want to look much closer at other types of evidence to help determine if they should be considered the same language or dialect, if they can use the same video materials, etc. I'd consider things such as attitudes toward other varieties of signing, perceptions of sameness or difference, evidence of regular communication between two groups, and if necessary RTT testing. But, I wouldn't rely on wordlist comparisons alone to make that judgment (as the scale above implies). Rather, I'd use the wordlist comparison to distinguish clear cases from unclear ones, so as to focus the more time-intensive survey work on those situations where it is most needed.

My evaluation criteria were similar to those used by the Parkhursts. I do not feel that the difference in categories or the prioritization that I used to compare these wordlists should make a significant difference to the scores obtained. As Bickford points out, conclusions based solely on wordlists are indicators but not completely definitive, but it is not thought to be profitable to try to analyse the present data in greater detail.

8.3 RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The partial results of the comparisons of the FSL wordlists by Regions are found in table 1. Due to the time necessary to analyse similarity for each cell of the matrix, those that are not pertinent to the purpose of this study were not compared. This study was initiated to determine whether or not the Deaf from different areas could understand one central dialect of FSL. Once it was discovered that the dialect used in Baguio (CAR) shared 80–90 percent similarities with all but NCR (which showed only 71 percent similarity to CAR) it was not deemed necessary to pursue the wordlist comparisons. The figure of 80 percent similarities and above is an arbitrary one, and further intelligibility testing may be needed to determine how well the Deaf in different areas understand each other.

seems to be more representative of Filipino Sign Language than NCR because all the scores between CAR and the other regions were in the range of 80–90 percent with the exception of the score of 71 percent with NCR. The NCR wordlist was obtained from two people, a man and a woman. The man who gave the wordlist did not seem to have a good command of English and may have just guessed the sign for some of the items. However, the woman was a teacher and seemed well educated. It may be that Capital Region has a greater choice of synonyms, leading to greater differences in the scores.

From the scores obtained between CAR and the other regions which were 80 percent and above, including ASL, it seems safe to say that FSL is closely related to ASL. However, the Filipino Deaf consider their language to be different from ASL, especially as a number of handshapes seem to be unique to the Philippines. Several other handshapes are shared with other Asian signed languages but are not found in ASL. When I asked a Deaf Filipina friend about the relationship between ASL and FSL, she stated, “Yes, technically 60 percent similar to ASL.” On further enquiry she wrote, “ASL and FSL are related language [*sic*] but language are bit different.” This opinion is generally held among the Filipino Deaf I encountered.

The score between FSL, represented by the NCR wordlist, and Samar Sign Language (SSL) was 34%, showing that they are unrelated languages. This was expected, as the Deaf in the isolated area of San Julian on the east coast of Samar Island invented this language independently of FSL in order to communicate freely with each other. We only videoed two wordlists in San Julian, and they had only 51% similarity to each other. Many of the signs were similar to gestures, especially when it came to the names of animals, fruits, etc., so I observed quite a lot of variation between the two signers. The people whom I saw signing to each other, often for quite some time, did not seem to have any problem communicating with each other, so it is probable that they have quite a large vocabulary with a lot of synonyms.

No negative attitudes toward the signing of any part were noted in my conversations with the Deaf. At the computer school for the Deaf in Manila students come from all parts of the nation with no observable attitudinal problems. The Deaf in the Philippines feel unified as a nation.

9.0 CONCLUSION

The survey revealed only two signed languages in the Philippines: Filipino Sign Language and Samar Sign Language. (Possibly a more accurate name for the latter would be San Julian Sign Language as that is the village where most of the Deaf seem to live. However, the Deaf themselves have given the name “Samar Sign Language” to their language, so that is how I am referring to it also.)

Even though linguistically ASL and FSL are two dialects of a single language, for sociolinguistic reasons they should be recognized as separate languages. FSL and ASL have close historical links, but as time passes the two seem to be drifting apart, similar to the situation in Malaysia (see Hurlbut 2000).

In summary, this study concludes that a single language will reach all the Deaf that were surveyed. The Samar Sign Language speakers are now learning FSL from other Deaf.

Because of the cost of schooling in the Philippines, many Deaf children still do not have an opportunity to get an education. It is recognized that unfortunately these children will not be adequately served by FSL. Unlike many countries, The Philippines does not have a strong stigma attached to deafness, so that the children are not usually kept hidden in the house. However, economically it is very difficult for many parents of Deaf children to send them to school. The schools are often far away, and the fees may be high, so it is only a fortunate few who can get an education.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I was not able to obtain wordlists from Region IX or the ARMM to assess the sign language used there. It would be good to video some of the Deaf from Region IX and the ARMM, to find out if the signing there is unique or whether it is a dialect of FSL.

While no attitudes were noted against the Baguio dialect, it may be that the difference in religion of the far south might create a division between the dialects. This situation would provide an additional reason to survey this region.

There could be further exploration of synonymy in the procedure for eliciting wordlists. Because of the constraints of technology, it was not possible to compare the signs from the various signers while at the same time eliciting that item from a new signer. This situation resulted in eliciting a large number of words that were considered to be synonyms, but they may have been a misunderstanding of the semantic range of the item, or simply a misunderstanding of what sign was being requested, or other problems.

I would like to be able to notice that one sign was different from another as I elicit rather than having to wait until the list was transcribed. By that time there was no longer opportunity to ask the subject more questions about the signs offered—why they were different from the signs used by others in the same community or from neighboring regions.

Particularly in NCR, it would be good to see if the low scores there were due to factors such as the above.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help that I received from many people while I was in the Philippines. Special thanks go to Gilda Quintua who accompanied me on all of the survey trips in 2005. She was not only my guide and “cameraman,” but she introduced me to the administrators of schools for the Deaf that we visited as well as her Deaf friends in many places. She also gave me advice on the places to go and how to get there.

Ed and Evelyn Nagales were also very helpful in driving me to find Deaf in several places where they had contacts.

Others who helped were the administrators in the schools for the Deaf in the different Regions who chose the people to be videoed. The Deaf students and adults also gave their time to sign the wordlists and stories about their experiences. Without their help this survey would not have been possible.

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