

A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF BRUNCA SIGN LANGUAGE IN COSTA RICA¹

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0. Introduction

This paper offers a preliminary examination of Brunca Sign Language, a sign language variety that is used in one indigenous community in Costa Rica. The paper briefly examines 1) the sociolinguistic setting of Brunca Sign Language and 2) the relationship of Brunca Sign Language to other documented sign language varieties in Costa Rica. The conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses some implications for future research.

1. The Sociolinguistic Setting of Brunca Sign Language

Brunca Sign Language is used by one group of Boruca Indians in the Southern part of Costa Rica. Brunca Sign Language is named for the pueblo where the sign language is used. The pueblo Brunca, located in the district of Boruca in the canton of Buenos Aires in the province of Puntarenas, has approximately 800 inhabitants. Normally in a population of this size, one would expect only 1 or 2 deaf people. The pueblo Brunca, however, has 8 deaf people, four to eight times the expected deaf population. Six of the eight deaf people are children below the age of puberty, one is fourteen, and one is forty years of age. All of the deaf people sign, and the great majority of hearing people also sign.

The situation in Brunca is quite similar to other small communities with larger than expected deaf populations in Latin America (Johnson 1991), the Caribbean (Washabaugh, Woodward and De Santis 1978; Woodward 1982), and Africa (Frishberg 1978, 1987). Deaf people in such communities are integrated into the majority of everyday activities in the community; there is no separate deaf community; and there are generally no negative stereotypes of deaf people. The hearing and deaf people in these communities use a sign language that differs in structure from the spoken language(s) in the community, and often this sign language is completely independent of any other known sign languages.

2. The Relationship of Brunca Sign Language to Other Documented Sign Language Varieties in Costa Rica

In order to examine the possibility of independent development of Brunca Sign Language, this section of the paper will use a special vocabulary list for sign language

