

# Making identity visible: In search of regional accents in sign languages

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In this presentation, we ask the question: **what evidence is there for regional accents in sign languages?**

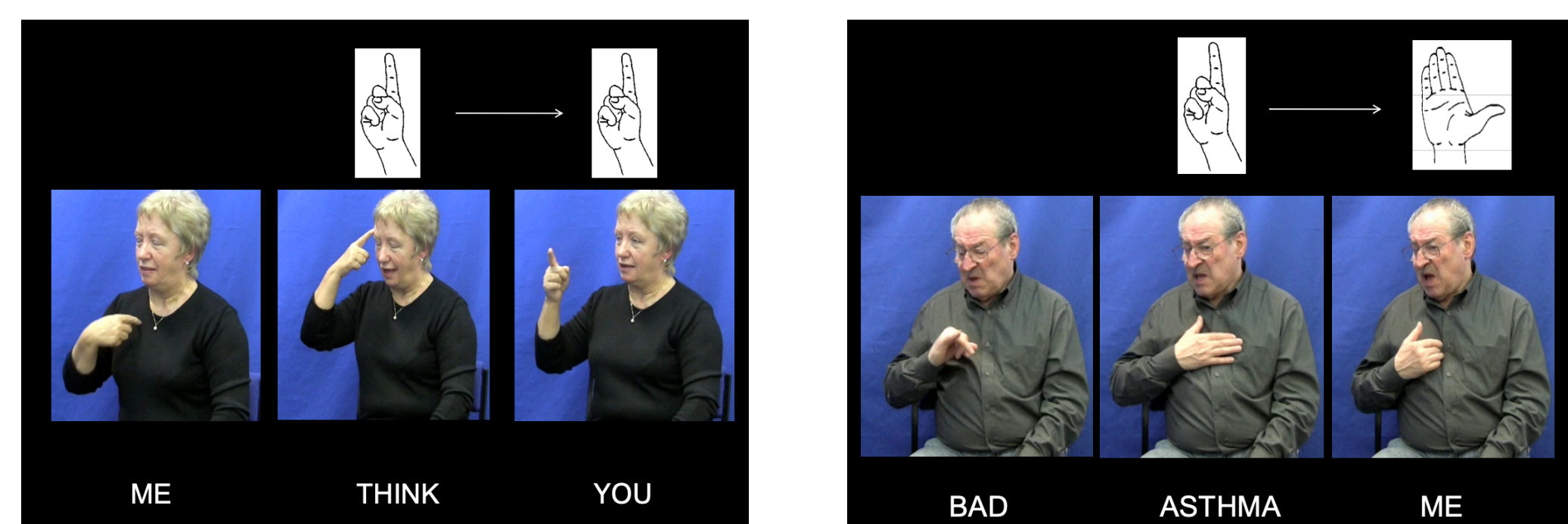
Regional ‘accent’ in sign languages refers to **systematic differences** in the use of **handshapes**, **locations** and **movements** in signs, for example, between signers from different regions.

Sociophonetic differences do index **ethnicity** in American Sign Language (ASL) (McCaskill et al., 2011). Others reflect fluency differences between native signers and **second language learners** (e.g., Mirus et al., 2001; Schembri et al., forthcoming).



## HANDSHAPE VARIATION

In previous work on **variation in signs with 1 handshape** in BSL (Fenlon et al., 2013), multivariate analyses of 2084 tokens revealed **signers in Cardiff, Belfast and Bristol** favoured more non-citation variants, while signers in **London, Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester** did not. Not clear how this distribution constitutes regional accent.



**The evidence collected thus far for regional accents in sign languages (including British Sign Language) is not compelling, but are we looking in the right place?**



In a recent **BBC news report**, a deaf actor described his experiences training some other actors to use the ‘Glaswegian accent’ in BSL.

The deaf actor discusses what a **Glaswegian ‘accent’ looks like**, providing rich examples of sign language **ideologies and attitudes** about variation. He suggests some **prosodic features** are important – that Glaswegian signing should be more ‘**expansive**’ and ‘**expressive**’, with **larger movements** and **more facial expression**.

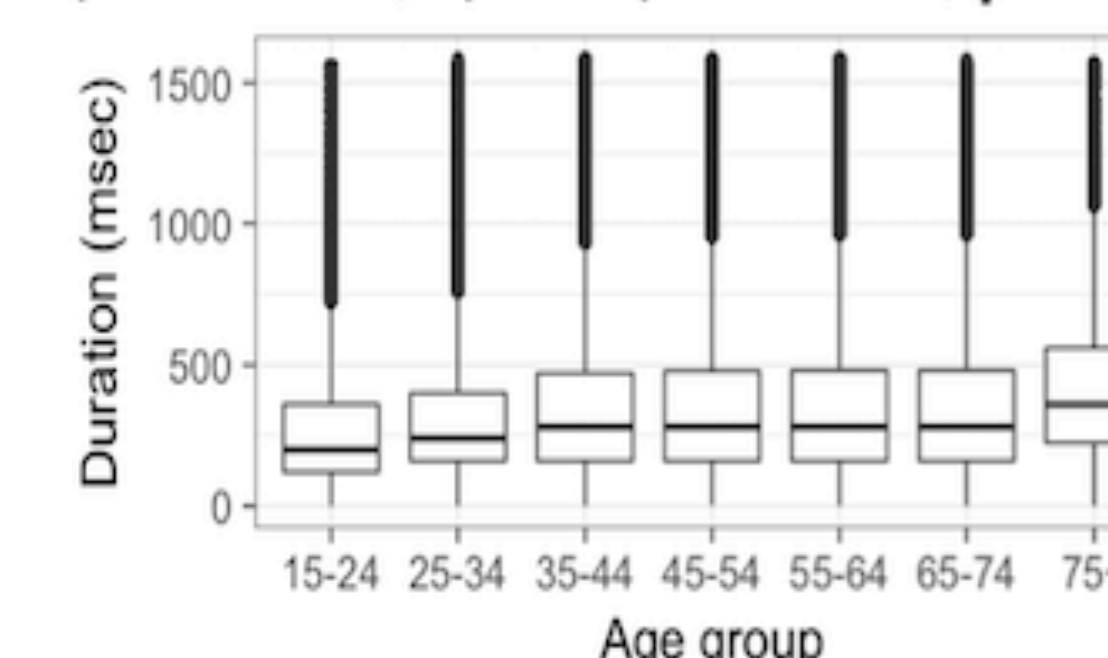
He demonstrates how some common **BSL signs might be ‘code-blended’ with Scottish dialect words** (e.g., he signs DRINK while mouthing ‘swally’). **Regional variation in mouthing** has not yet been explored.

Anecdotal observation suggests that **when British deaf people talk about differences in ‘accent’**, they often use this term to refer to **regional lexical variation**. Perhaps they are also noticing regional variation in mouthing? Work is currently underway on interview data from the BSL Corpus Project that will address this. Watch this space for future work on how BSL signers make regional identity visible!

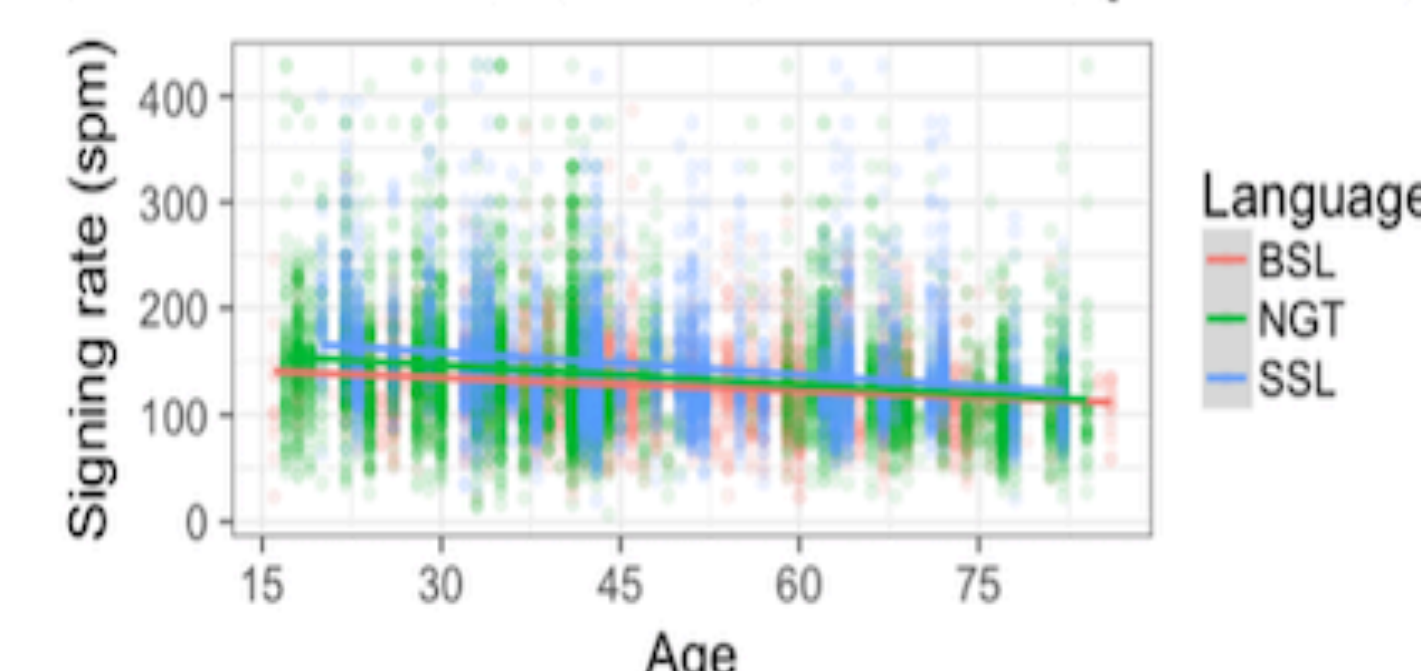
## SIGNING RATE

Recently, as part of a larger study on sign duration in three sign language corpora, we explored the **average signing rate** in the BSL Corpus data from 8 cities across the UK (Börstell et al., forthcoming), as a result of **anecdotal reports that Glaswegians signed ‘fast’**. We found **age differences but no regional differences**.

With age, sign **duration increases**  
( $\beta = 1.1134$ ,  $t(8859) = 13.351$ ,  $p < .0001$ )



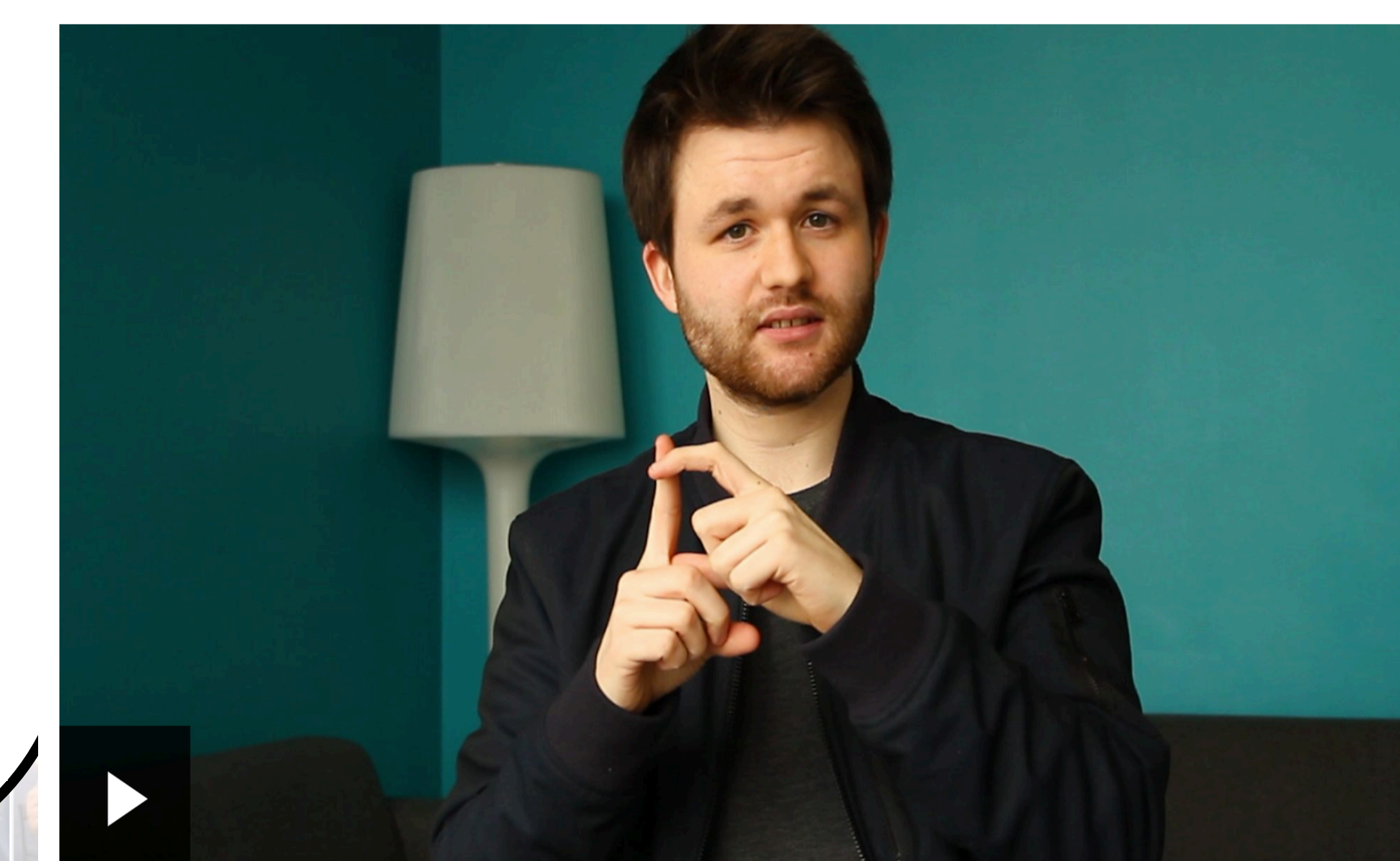
... and signing **rate decreases**  
( $\beta = -0.50546$ ,  $t(493.8) = -8.052$ ,  $p < .0001$ )



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### Scots dialect brought to life in sign language

Actor Connor Bryson brings to life the Scots dialect in sign language.

The 24 year old advised the cast of the BBC comedy ‘Two Doors Down’, teaching the actors to speak in sign language but with a Glaswegian accent.

He said: “There are different signs for different regions in the UK. Glasgow is more like the people in Glasgow, more expansive, more emotional.”

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