

# Annelies Kusters: exploring deaf communities globally

BY ALEX GRIFFITHS-BROWN

Pioneering deaf scholar, Annelies Kusters, shares insights from her global research journey spanning two decades in deaf communities worldwide.



Annelies with the deaf people from Adamorobe, Ghana.

## You've travelled the world extensively through your work – what's surprised you most about the different communities that you've studied?

My travels have taken me to places around the world: three months in Suriname, about a year in Ghana spread over several visits, three years in India and various periods in Europe, including Belgium (where I grew up), Germany, and now the UK. In all these places, my focus has been on engaging with deaf communities, whether through volunteer work, research or by living there. I've been fascinated by how deaf people communicate with people unfamiliar with sign languages, observing and experiencing diverse interactions between deaf and hearing people. These interactions range from expressive gestures resembling sign language to reliance on pen and paper or digital devices. Cultural tendencies in deaf-hearing communication highlight varying preferences of hearing people: in Belgium, there's a notable expectation of spoken communication; in the UK, writing and using the BSL sign for 'thank you' are prevalent; while in India and Ghana, gestures are a common method of interaction.

Beyond communication methods, attitudes towards deafness vary significantly. Some communities

communicate easily with deaf people yet hold simplistic views, while others show reverence or view deafness as a cue for charity. During my PhD research in Adamorobe, a village in Ghana with a significant deaf population and its own sign language, I noted a policy against deaf individuals marrying each other to prevent more deaf children, reflecting complex societal attitudes towards deafness. These experiences highlight the non-linear relationship between communication practices and societal views on deafness across different cultures.

## Since starting your career, what key things have you seen change and develop?

The landscape has evolved significantly, both in academia and within deaf communities, reflecting broader shifts in society and technology. In the academic realm, one of the most heartening developments is the increase in deaf scholars securing permanent positions. Reflecting on the last 15 years, an increasing number of deaf people in the UK have obtained their PhDs and climbed the ranks to assistant or associate professors.

The calibre and complexity of work in Deaf Studies have also taken a leap forward. Scholars are not only raising the bar in terms

of quality but also diversifying the themes explored. We're seeing vibrant discussions around topics like the deaf ecosystem, deaf mobilities, and deaf sensorial experiences. Our increasingly interdisciplinary approach is enriching the field, fostering a more nuanced understanding of deaf experiences.

Turning to community changes, the shifts are equally profound. The trend towards mainstreaming in education has become more pronounced, with fewer deaf schools and clubs and a new norm of becoming a signer later in life. This change, while there are new avenues for learning sign language online and connecting with deaf people digitally, also presents challenges, especially in fostering the vibrancy and accessibility of physical deaf spaces. Additionally, the influence of International Sign on national sign languages has grown, reflecting the increasing global digital interconnectedness of deaf communities.

## What are the challenges and opportunities facing deaf academics currently?

The academic world today offers a unique mix of hurdles and breakthroughs for deaf scholars. On the bright side, AI has been a game changer. Innovations like automated subtitles and enhanced writing support foster greater independence and also

## IN CONVERSATION WITH



The team involved in recording Annelies' Ishaare film in India. <https://vimeo.com/142245339>



The MobileDeaf team.

open up new avenues for engagement and collaboration in academic circles.

However, the journey isn't without its obstacles. A pressing concern is the vulnerability of specialised programmes within universities. We're witnessing the risk that smaller, niche programmes – many of which are pivotal to the education and training of sign language interpreters or the advancement of deaf studies – are facing cuts or outright elimination. In addition, it is very difficult to launch new specialised programmes if these programmes are small. For deaf academics, particularly those whose teaching and research are intertwined with these programmes, this presents a substantial challenge. It not only affects their professional roles but also impacts the broader ecosystem of deaf education and advocacy, and the vitality of the Deaf Studies field.

### Do you have a particular hero who inspires you?

I've been fortunate to find inspiration in several remarkable people throughout my journey. Dr Paddy Ladd, my lecturer at University of Bristol and my PhD supervisor, was my first deaf academic hero. His profound love for exploring cultural perspectives within deaf communities and the insightful questions he posed turbo-fuelled my drive. He challenged me to think deeper and broader.

Today, my list of heroes has expanded significantly to include my deaf colleagues at my university and across other

institutions, the deaf PhD students I am privileged to supervise, and the pioneering generation of deaf scholars, many of whom are now retired. Their resilience, wisdom, and unwavering commitment serve as a source of inspiration to me.

### What are you most proud of in your life, professional or personal?

There are two recent achievements that stand out and fill me with immense pride. The first is attaining my full professorship, a milestone that coincided with my 40th birthday.

The second is leading the MobileDeaf project from 2017 to 2023, which you can explore in detail at <https://mobiledeaf.org.uk>. This project, funded generously by the European Research Council, was a deep dive into how deaf people from different countries interact and adapt their signing across various sign languages and practices. It was a groundbreaking study on the impact of globalisation and mobility on language practices within deaf communities, made all the more special because it was conducted by a fully deaf research team with expertise in anthropology, geography and cultural studies.

On a different but equally fulfilling note, I've ventured into filmmaking, directing seven ethnographic films since 2015. These films, which can be viewed on Vimeo and through the MobileDeaf project's website, are based on my ethnographic fieldwork. They offer an immersive glimpse into the lives and communication strategies of

deaf people. Filmmaking has allowed me to share the stories of deaf people in a way that's engaging and true to their modes of expression.

### With all of the work you do, it doesn't sound like you have a huge amount of spare time! But in those moments, where would we find you?

I treasure my downtime and have several favourite ways to spend it, especially on weekends and holidays. I enjoy walking or cycling through forests, traversing hills, or strolling along the beaches of Scotland. Indoors, I find joy in immersing myself in the pages of a good book, diving into the strategic complexities of board games, or cooking savoury dishes from my collection of cookbooks.

**Annelies Kusters is the first deaf scholar ever to achieve full professor status in the field of deaf studies and sign language studies in the UK.**  
To read more about this, scan this QR code.



## INTERVIEWE



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Annelies has directed seven ethnographic films since 2015.

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