

Sociolinguistic typology, morphology complexity and indicating verbs in sign languages

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Recent work (Schembri et al., 2018) has set out to examine the possible relationship between proposed social determinants of morphological ‘complexity’ (Trudgill, 2011) and the typological nature of the sign languages of deaf communities. We have explored how to apply Trudgill’s notion of linguistic ‘complexity’ applies to sign languages, with a focus on British Sign Language (BSL) and Auslan (Australian Sign Language). We have shown how BSL and Auslan appear to exhibit low levels of irregularisation. There is a small set of related irregular negative forms in each language, for example, but many other grammatical forms appear predictable. Second, there is limited morphological opacity: the relationship between form and meaning in BSL and Auslan is often relatively transparent. Third, there is limited syntagmatic redundancy, with plural marking of most nouns being optional, for example, although there are two subsystems of verbs which share some characteristics with agreement and classifier systems in spoken languages. Fourth, there is limited marking of morphological categories: neither BSL nor Auslan employ morphological markers for gender, tense, or voice, while the marking of aspect, for example, does not appear highly grammaticalised (c.f., Bergman & Dahl, 1994). Overall, it might be argued that BSL and Auslan are – as has also been claimed for American Sign Language (ASL) by Liddell (2003) – inflectionless languages (although for a different view of ASL, see Aronoff, Meir & Sandler, 2005). Previous analyses have compared BSL and Auslan grammar to spoken language creoles (e.g., Johnston, 1989), based on the assumption that these sign languages are relatively young languages. However, the unique sociolinguistic situation of sign languages in which only a minority of signers (possibly no more than 5% of the adult deaf community) acquire BSL and Auslan as a first language from signing deaf parents may also be relevant here, as has been noted for other sign languages (e.g., Fischer, 1978, for ASL). Additionally, Trudgill (2011) has suggested that key social characteristics of communities may influence the typological nature of the community’s language. Although deaf communities are small and involve dense social networks (both social characteristics that may lend themselves to linguistic ‘complexification’), it is likely that many signers participate in these networks in a limited fashion. The highly variable nature of the sign language acquisition process for most adults also means that there is ongoing contact between native signers and the majority of deaf individuals who only acquire sign languages in later childhood and early adulthood, a factor that may work against the emergence of linguistic ‘complexification’. Furthermore, the signing community also includes significant numbers of hearing signers who have acquired BSL or Auslan in adulthood.

In this paper, I examine recent work on the indicating verb system in BSL (Fenlon et al., 2018) and its implications for an understanding of morphology ‘complexity’ in sign languages. In this subsystem of BSL grammar, verbs may be directed towards present referents, or towards locations associated with absent referents, to represent, for example, their agent and/or patient arguments. The development of verb directionality has been studied in emerging sign languages, such as Nicaraguan Sign Language, (Senghas & Coppola, 2001) as well as in artificial sign languages (Motamedi et al., 2018). This data suggests that such directionality develops over time from one in which arguments are represented by the signer’s own body to one in which arguments are associated with abstract locations in space around the signer’s body. This system is generally considered an example of ‘complexification’ in the sign language linguistics literature, and is widely analysed as a person agreement marking system (e.g., Pfau et al., 2018). Our data show, however, that the use of abstract spatial locations away from the signer’s body is not the preferred strategy in one of the oldest existing sign languages, BSL. In fact, there is a strong preference for one of the arguments to be represented by the signer’s body, in contrast to what the data from emerging and artificial sign languages suggests. I would like to propose that there may be both linguistic and social factors involved in conditioning the kind of directionality favoured in our data. I will also discuss the implications of our work for an understanding of why spontaneous data from representative corpora of sign languages may differ from results from experimental data from different populations.