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Contact and morphology in Sign Languages and Creole Languages

Language contact and morphology play a pivotal role in both Sign Linguistics and Creolistics. While spoken creole languages emerge in situations of intense contact, sign languages are claimed to emerge in the absence of contact with other languages. Creole languages were thought to have little morphology, whereas newly emerging sign languages quickly develop complex simultaneous morphology. These contrasts are central to our paper, in which we explore the differences and similarities in Sign Linguistics and Creolistics with regard to morphology and language contact

Despite the lack of contact with other (sign) languages, the emerging Nicaraguan Sign Language (LSN) quickly developed complex simultaneous morphology in the form of classifier predicates of motion and location and in the form of spatially inflecting verbal agreement (Kegl et al. 1999). As such, LSN patterns like most other sign languages studied (Aronoff et al. 2004). The fact that unrelated sign languages use the same type of complex simultaneous morphology suggests that there is a universal, modality specific tendency to exploit channel-specific affordances.

Other emerging sign languages –all evolving in communities with a high incidence of hereditary deafness- have not (yet) developed this complex simultaneous morphology. Thus, Providence Island Sign Language and Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language do not make use of classifier predicates for the expression of motion (Washabaugh 1986; Aronoff et al. 2004) and Kata Kolok does not make use of spatial inflections to mark verb agreement (de Vos, 2012). As such, these emerging sign languages resemble alternate sign languages like Aboriginal sign languages (Kendon, 1988), which may be considered manual relexifications of spoken language substrates. In other words, the lack of simultaneous morphology in alternate sign languages seems to be the result of a direct transfer of linguistic structure from a spoken language to a signed language.

In our paper, we will present the various instances of restricted or absent use of complex simultaneous morphology described in the literature. We will discuss to what extent the restricted use of simultaneous morphology is an effect of an emerging state, like in LSN, or of language contact, like in alternate sign languages. In addition, we will consider the question to what extent cross-linguistic variation in the gestural substrate of emerging sign languages may be responsible for the variation found in the particular types of simultaneous constructions used. As such, we hope to shed light on the interplay of two major factors impacting on sign language morphology; universal channel-inherent tendencies and sociolinguistic features allowing or impeding their emergence.

We will conclude with an evaluation of the comparability of morphology in spoken creoles and sign languages and the possible links between creole language and sign language genesis on the basis of our findings, and suggest new venues for cross-modal research around the theme of innovations.

References

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