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Sign languages and sociolinguistic typology

This paper sets out to examine the relationship between proposed social determinants of morphological ‘complexity’ (Trudgill, 2011) and the typological nature of the sign languages of deaf communities. We sketch how the notion of linguistic ‘complexity’ applies to American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL) and Auslan (Australian Sign Language). First, all three sign languages 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, with little unpredictable allomorphy. 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: none of these sign languages employ morphological markers for gender, tense, or voice, while the marking of aspect, for example, does not appear highly grammaticalized. Overall, it might be argued that three sign languages represent, as already claimed for ASL by Liddell (2003), languages with relatively little inflection. This last point is, however, controversial and not one shared by all sign language researchers (e.g., Aronoff, Meir & Sandler, 2005), but, we will argue, that counterclaims rest on assumptions that abstract away significantly from the nature of sign language data (Cormier, Schembri & Woll, 2010). Indeed, previous analyses have compared these three sign languages to spoken language creoles (Fischer, 1978; Ladd & Edwards, 1982; Johnston, 1989), based on earlier analyses of their grammar and the assumption that these sign languages are relatively young languages. Drawing on the apparent ‘simplicity’ of core argument marking and tense/aspect marking in sign languages, Gil (2014) has again suggested that both sign languages and creoles, as young languages, are less ‘complex’ than older established 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 them as a first language from signing deaf parents may also be relevant here, as has been noted (e.g., Fischer, 1978). Many deaf adults acquire these sign language varieties as delayed first languages (e.g., Emmorey, 2002). Trudgill (2011) has suggested that key social characteristics of communities may influence the typological nature of their languages. Although many deaf communities are relatively small and may involve dense social networks (both social characteristics that it is claimed may lend themselves to linguistic ‘complexification’), the highly variable nature of the sign language acquisition process for most adults may also mean that there is ongoing contact between native signers, hearing non-native signers and those deaf individuals who only acquire sign languages in later childhood and early adulthood, a factor that may work against the emergence of linguistic ‘complexification’. Together with language age and the iconic properties of language in the visual-gestural modality, this key social factor may contribute to the nature of sign language grammar in a way perhaps not fully appreciated until now.

References

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