

Some remaining questions concerning signed languages and signed language research

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Abstract

Next year, it will be 50 years since William Stokoe published his pioneering study of American Sign Language (Stokoe, 1960). That publication is generally regarded as the onset of modern signed language linguistics. 2010 is also an anniversary year for Flemish signed language linguistics, as the first doctoral dissertation on Flemish Sign Language (VGT) was defended in 1990 (Loncke, 1990). Given this, it seems like a good time to reflect upon the state of the art of the research domain. I would like to start on a personal note: when I began my work on Flemish Sign Language, some 22 years ago now, things looked fairly straightforward. From the publications I was reading at that time, I gathered that signed languages were not altogether that different from spoken languages and it looked as if studying VGT wouldn't be too different from studying Dutch or English. Signed languages – as well as spoken languages – were considered to be homogeneous systems and signed utterances were treated as if they were entirely made up of lexical constituents that themselves form part of grammatical constructions. Most – if not all – theoretical approaches to the study of spoken languages were considered equally appropriate for the study of signed languages. In spite of the atypical acquisition process most deaf children experienced, it seemed that almost all prelingually deaf people became a member of the Deaf community and acquired a good proficiency in the local signed language. And anyway, all it took to be able to study a good model of the language was to find native signers who were willing to act as informants, signers that were deaf-of-deaf or, if possible, deaf-of-deaf-of-deaf. Does this sound far too caricatural? Probably. Most probably. I nevertheless dare to think that this sketch will sound familiar to a number (a majority?) of other researchers who were “getting started” around the same time. Today, things seem to be a lot less straightforward and it is clear that many important questions concerning signed languages and signed language research remain un(satisfactorily) answered. In this presentation, I would like to discuss some of these outstanding questions. With regard to the linguistic structure of signed languages: • What about “visual variation” (Perniss et al., 2007)? How similar are signed languages? Is there indeed a “shared syntactic patterning across sign languages” (Johnston, 1989:312)? • What is the relationship between gesture and signed languages, and in general, between different forms of gestural communication? • Do signed languages indeed show two (or more) “manifestations” (cf. Cuxac’s illustrative versus non-illustrative intent; Vermeerbergen’s still and sparkling water; Cogill-Koez’s linguistic channel and channel of visual representation)? And if so, how are they related? Where lies the boundary between the two? • How to deal with non-(frozen/established)-lexical elements in a signed utterance? With regard to the birth and development of signed languages: • What is the role of the majority spoken language in the process of a new signed language emerging? What is the role of homesigning? Of micro-community signed languages? • What about the potential influence of majority spoken languages on community signed languages? • Is it possible that signed languages experience what might be called a “phase of accelerated development”? What would/could be the effect of this on the structure of the language? With regard to socio-linguistic issues: • Are we fully aware of the (sometimes changing) socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-linguistic conditions when studying/documenting a signed language (cf. the issue of hearing late-learners of the language playing a(n ever more) crucial role as signed language transmitters - Ramsey, 2009)? • How about the heterogeneity of/diversity in any signed language community (e.g. the broad range of levels of communicative competence in the signed language). How does this impact on the language of the community? With regard to research methodology: • Is it a good idea to only work with third generation native signers when they constitute such a small minority of the community whose language we claim to be describing? • Signed language linguistics: an “oral language compatible approach” or a “SL differential view” (Karlsson, 1984:149-150). We probably need both. But how (much of each)? I am aware that most of these questions have been discussed in the signed language literature at some point. However, it seems to me that to date conclusive answers remain to be given.