Understanding Size and Shape Classifiers in Italian Sign Language
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Introduction. Among the categories of classifiers (henceforth: CLs) identified by Supalla (1982; 1986) in his analysis of American Sign Language (ASL), Size and Shape Specifiers (henceforth: SASSs) have received little attention, being merely defined as having adjectival functions. A formal analysis considering (i) the morphophonological features distinguishing SASSs from adjectives of size and shape, (ii) their distribution within the Determiner Phrase (DP) with respect to the other nominal elements and (iii) their typological classification with respect to classifiers conveying size and shape in oral languages, has not been developed yet. Despite their apparent simplicity, SASSs are morphologically complex signs, distinct from lexical adjectives, in which each finger serves as a separate morpheme. Moreover, they can fulfill different morphosyntactic functions: besides functioning as attributive adjectives within DPs, they can form compounds or convey evaluative features. SASSs have been detected in Italian Sign Language (LIS) as well, and classified as ‘descriptive classifiers’ (Corazza 1990; Mazzoni 2008). Considering that different SASSs appear together with attributive adjectives within DPs to convey information about the size and shape of nominal referents, they could be thought as really belonging to the adjectival class. Therefore, it could be argued that they are phrases generated in the specifier positions of dedicated functional projections (FPs), with which they are semantically related, as it has been proposed for attributive adjectives belonging to the DP (Cinque 1994, 2010; Scott 2002). The final order of modifiers belonging to the LIS DP results from successive pied-piping movement of the noun phrase (NP) within the DP, towards the specifier position where it checks referentiality (Bertone 2007; Mantovan 2015).

Goals. Through the analysis of the morphophonological and morphosyntactic properties of SASSs in LIS, the present paper attempts to improve the understanding of these complex signs, accounting for (i) their internal morphological structure, (ii) their actual function as adjectives within DPs, and (iii) their distribution within the DP, providing support or counter evidence for the cartographic analyses developed for oral languages (Cinque, Rizzi 2010). SASSs are further compared to classifiers devoted to size and shape in oral language, in order to check whether SASSs in LIS belong to the same classifications or they provide peculiar sign language-specific insights.

The study. In order to elicit the production of different SASSs and adjectives, I designed a picture-description task involving 4 native LIS signers. Participants were asked to describe 25 objects differing in size, shape, colour, material and quality, presented through drawings. Productions have been video recorded and annotated with ELAN.

Analysis. Considering the spreading of non-manual markers (NMMs) and the occurrence of indications or pauses as phrase-boundary markers, I have selected full DPs characterised by nouns followed by one or more SASSs, and nouns followed by both SASSs and adjectives (of colour, quality, origin or size). A preliminary analysis shows the following available orders among SASSs and adjectives in LIS:

(1) N>APorigin>CLshape:

HAT MEXICAN CLshape
‘a big Mexican hat’

(2) N>CLshape>CLsize:

STICKER CLshape CLsize
‘a not very big rectangular sticker’

(3) N>CLshape>CLdepth>CLsize:

BOOK CLshape CLdepth CLsize
‘a very big book’
The analysis carried out considering different properties exhibited by SASSs in LIS suggests that they are morphologically complex lexical signs functioning as adjectives when occurring in strictly descriptive contexts; SASSs belong to the nominal domain and possibly occupy dedicated FPs within the DP, which are ‘silent’ in other languages. Therefore, they could be considered a peculiar class of adjectives exploiting the unique sign language-specific possibility of being iconic and changing their morphological features to specify and convey many information simultaneously. Despite this, SASSs respect the classifications defined for oral languages, like their occurrence in nominal domains when adjectives are not enough and their distribution within the DP, confirming once again the importance of the comparison with oral languages and the richness and universality of the language faculty.