

# Understanding Size and Shape Classifiers in Italian Sign Language

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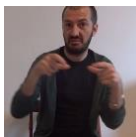


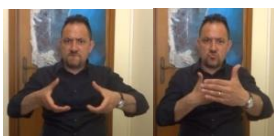
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**Introduction.** Among the categories of classifiers (henceforth: CLs) identified by Supalla (1982; 1986) in his analysis of American Sign Language (ASL), Size and Shape Specifiers (henceforth: SASSs) have received little attention, being merely defined 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 fulfil 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 <sup>aug</sup>   | ‘a big Mexican hat’ |
- (2) N>CLshape>CLsize:
- |   |   |  |                                      |
|---|---|--|--------------------------------------|
|  |  |  | ‘a not very big rectangular sticker’ |
| STICKER   | CLshape   | CLsize   |                                      |
- (3) N>CLshape>CLdepth>CLsize:
- |   |   |   |  |                   |
|---|---|---|--|-------------------|
|  |  |  |  | ‘a very big book’ |
| BOOK  | CLshape   | CLdepth   | CLsize <sup>aug</sup>  |                   |

(4) N>CLshape>CLdepth>APcolour:

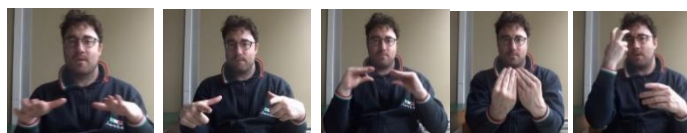
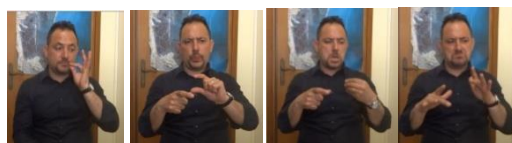


TABLE CLshape CLdepth BLACK

‘a rounded black table’

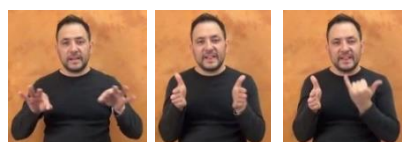
(5) N>CLsize>APcolour>APquality:



CUP CLsize WHITE SIMPLE

‘a simple little white cup’

(6) N>CLsize>APsize:



CARPET CLsize SMALL

‘a little carpet’

Taking into account the morphosyntactic properties of the SASSs produced, it seems that they actually are adjectives because: (i) they occupy the portion of the DP dedicated to attributive adjectives, resulting in the following order: N>APorigin>CLshape>CLdepth>CLsize>APcolour>APsize>APquality; (ii) the order of SASSs dedicated to shape, depth and size respectively, matches the one identified by Scott (2002) for adjectives conveying the same features in oral languages, i.e. APshape>APdepth>APsize; (iii) they agree with the noun they modify; (iv) they cannot occur alone or function as pronouns (as entity classifiers, instead, do); (v) they are gradable; (vi) they do not classify referents but rather specify information of size and shape. However, the analysis of the morphophonological properties shows that SASSs differ from lexical adjectives to some extent: besides being distinct manual signs (see the CL for small size vs. the adjective SMALL in (6)), SASSs (i) can modify their phonological parameters to convey the meaning ‘bigger’ or ‘smaller’ (see CLshape in (2) vs. (3)); (ii) they display a high degree of iconicity but maintain their categorical status because they are selected considering the size and shape of the entity, but they do not reflect its real dimensions (Emmorey, Herzig 2003); (iii) they can convey more features simultaneously, which, however, follow an order of selection: shape first, conveyed through the handshape iconically selected for the entity, followed by depth, defined through the degree of openness of the handshape (example (3) vs. (4)), and finally size, specified through movement and distance between the hands. NMMs play a crucial role in these constructions, since they complete or modify the meaning of the manual sign (in (1) they complete the CLshape adding the meaning ‘big’), confirming once again the morphological richness of sign languages, which can convey many information simultaneously through both hands and facial expressions. As for their pragmatic function, SASSs occur in strictly descriptive contexts in which it is important to be as precise as possible about the entity properties, even by employing lexical elements other than adjectives when adjectives are not enough. In this respect, LIS seems to belong to that group of languages with few adjectival lexical signs while displaying a rich set of classifiers defining size and shape, such as Tariana, an oral language spoken in the state of Amazonas (Aikhenvald 2000; 2003). However, SASSs in LIS differ from classifiers used by oral languages conveying size and shape, i.e. numeral and gender classifiers, because they are neither bound to numerals, nor define the gender (considered a semantic category by Aikhenvald (2000) and Bertone (2008)) of the entity. For instance, the CL defining shape in (3) is not a gender classifier, since the specific handshape for flat and wide entities in LIS is the ‘b’ configuration (Mazzoni 2008).

**Conclusions.** 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.

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