UNDERSTANDING SIZE AND SHAPE CLASSIFIERS IN ITALIAN SIGN LANGUAGE (LIS)
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INTRODUCTION

- Morphologically complex elements in which each finger can be meaningful, called size and shape specifiers (SASSs) (Supalla 1982; 1986).
- Two categories (Supalla 1986 for ASL; Schweidlof 2003 for NGT):
  - Static classifiers: the handshape represents the shape of the entity;
  - Tracing classifiers: handshape associated to a movement that outlines the shape of the reference.
- SASSs in LIS are called descriptive classifiers and are considered as functioning as adjectives, but no formal analysis has been provided (Corizza 1990; Mazzoni 2012). From this research, they seem to be ordered among other attributive adjectives within the LIS DP.

Methodology

- Participants: 4 LIS native signers;
- Elicitation task: picture description (25 items of different size, shape, colour, material, quality);
- Data annotation with ELAN.

Morpho-phonological analysis

- High degree of iconicity
- Gradability through modification of phonological parameters
- Simultaneity of features

Comparison with spoken languages

- SASSs in LIS can occur when no lexical adjective is available (for instance, for shape and depth) or in combination with lexical adjectives. In this respect, LIS seems to belong to that group of languages with few lexical adjectives for size and shape features but a rich set of classifiers, like Tarana (Aikhenvald 2003):
  - KANA bri HAWA-MEA mirror big-clip:flat:round 'big round mirror'
  - TARIANA (2003): 'a big round vase' (2003; 72)
- SASSs differ from numeral classifiers encoding size and shape in spoken languages.

Distribution among adjectives

N>APorigin>CLshape

1) 'a big round Mexican hat'

N>CLshape>CLdepth>CLsize

2) 'a very big book'

N>CLshape>CLdepth>APcolor

3) 'a round black table'

N>CLshape>APcolor>APvalue

4) 'a simple little white cup'

N>CLsize>APsize

5) 'a little carpet'

WHAT’S NEW!

- LIS can convey features of shape, size and depth also through SASSs, which are ordered among direct modification adjectives within the LIS DP.
- Considering SASSs dedicated to size, shape and depth the universal order is: APsize>APdepth>APshape>NP
- The attested order of SASSs matches the order of adjectives dedicated to features of shape, size and depth: NP>CLshape>CLdepth>CLsize

CONCLUSIONS

- In LIS we find different categories of SASSs which can be employed to convey information about size and shape of entities.
- SASSs are characterized by morpho-phonological properties which are typical of visuo-gestural languages, but they also display morpho-syntactic properties typical of attributive lexical adjectives.
- SASSs belong to the lower portion of the DP and are ordered among direct modification adjectives, respecting the hierarchy proposed for spoken languages.
- We can conclude that SASSs form a special class of adjectives displaying sign language-specific properties.

Selected References


Acknowledgments

This work has been supported by the SIGN-HUB project “European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation” program, grant agreement No 693349.