

The role of mouthing and fingerspelling and their (similar) functions in the Russian Sign Language Corpus

Donnerstag,
05.03.2020
09:00–09:30
ESA1 HG HS B

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Fingerspelling (FS) is a linguistic feature of sign languages in which letters from spoken language alphabets are represented by conventionalized handshapes (Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006). Mouthings (M) are mouth movements that resemble the articulation of spoken words during signing (Boyes-Braem & Sutton-Spence 2001).

FS and M are often described as outcomes of cross-modal language contact without parallels in spoken language situations and are unique to sign-spoken/written language contact (Valli & Lucas 1992). Although FS and M are diverse in their nature and have their origin in contact between three modalities (FS is located at the interface between orthography & sign; M is located at the interface between speech & sign), their functions appear to be very similar (Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006). Following the same pattern, FS and M are used as means of representing spoken/written vocabulary in sign languages (Padden & Gunsauls 2003). Apart from this often cited function of filling in the lexical gaps or disambiguating the manual signs, we find the use of “redundant” M and FS. Redundant FS is used when there is already a lexical sign; redundant M corresponds exactly with the manual sign in terms of semantic congruency without the necessity for disambiguation. Interestingly, fingerspelled signs are reported to be accompanied by mouthings during signing (Johnston et al 2016). The complex nature of the FS and M interrelationship is intriguing and has not yet been explored systematically in any sign language.

This study adds novel data by looking at M and FS in Russian sign language (RSL) Corpus (Burkova 2012–2015). We investigate what drives the use of redundant fingerspelling and mouthing in RSL. We use corpus data to give a more objective impression of the frequency and variation in the use of these two phenomena.

In this presentation, we discuss that such redundant FS and M have a similar function: they make a word or specific meaning more prominent within an utterance, generally in focus constructions (information and contrastive focus). Fingerspelled items or the manual signs co-occurring with mouthings in the RSL corpus are singled out from a set of elements of equal type and structure to put themselves in the current state of attention.

Using RSL corpus data our analysis revealed that (1) 95% of all fingerspelled RSL items co-occur with mouthings, (2) 17% of all fingerspelled RSL items are used to put emphasis of a particular word and (3) the focused constituents are accompanied by mouthings more frequently than the non-focused ones. The study thus affirms previous descriptions of emphatic FS in ASL (Montermurro & Brentari 2018) and focused constituents accompanied by M in NGT (Crasborn & van der Kooij 2013).

References: Boyes-Braem P. & R. Sutton-Spence (eds.) (2001). The hands are the head of the mouth: The mouth as articulator in sign languages. Hamburg: Signum, 99–132. Burkova, S. (2012–2015). Russian Sign Language Corpus. <http://rsl.nstu.ru/> (30 July 2018). Crasborn, O. & E. van der Kooij (2013). The phonology of focus in Sign Language of the Netherlands. *Journal of Linguistics* 3, 1–51. Montemurro, K. & D. Brentari (2018). Emphatic fingerspelling as code-mixing in American Sign Language. *Proc Ling Soc Amer* 3, 1–13. Sandler, W. & D. Lillo-Martin (2006). *Sign language and linguistic universals*. Cambridge: CUP. Valli, C. & C. Lucas (1992). *Linguistics of American Sign Language: A resource text for ASL users*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.