

Title: Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages

Category: oral or poster

This contribution presents the results of a large-scale typological investigation of the core grammatical domains of possession and existence in sign languages (Zeshan & Perniss 2008). The study compiles data from over two dozen sign languages, and demonstrates latest methodological developments in sign language typology research, using visual stimulus materials for consistent data elicitation across a large, diverse sample of sign languages. The sign languages covered represent various geographical areas, including North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The sample includes sign languages both from urban deaf communities and from village communities with a high incidence of hereditary deafness.

We address a range of morphological and syntactic structures used in these different sign languages to express attributive and predicative possession, alienable and inalienable possession, as well as the related domains of existence and location. The diversity of structures to be discussed includes possessive pronouns, possessive and existential predicates, nominal juxtaposition, and negative existentials and possessives.

The main findings from this study are the following:

- Sign language structures in the domain of possession vary widely across languages and show a similar range of variation as spoken languages.
- The well-known close link between the notions of location, possession, and existence (e.g. Clark 1978, Lyons 1977) is even more conspicuous in sign languages due to their visual-spatial nature.
- Similar source domains for the grammaticalization of possessive structures, e.g. the Action Schema and the Existence Schema (Heine 1997), are found in both language modalities. Interestingly, the iconicity of signs often provides clues as to the direction of grammaticalization pathways.
- Unlike in previous studies in sign language typology (e.g. Zeshan 2004), there is no compelling evidence within the domain of possession for setting sign languages as a whole apart from spoken languages. Although a few structures are specific to sign languages, such as spatial mechanisms to express possession, overall the influence of language modality is marginal, and we cannot speak of a “sign language type” within the domain of possession.

Our study confirms that the linguistic categories used to describe possession and existence in spoken languages can be fruitfully applied to sign languages data. Since linguistic typology has concerned itself with spoken languages exclusively until very recently, this cannot be taken for granted, and validates previous work on the typology of possession and existence. The more general question of the “sign language type” remains valid for future investigations of other target domains. It is only by looking at language in both modalities that we can come to understand the full range of possibilities of the structure of human language and the degree of influence of modality on language structure in different grammatical domains.

References:

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