What is a sign language?

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In their effort to model the structure of bimodal bilingual sentences, Lillo-Martin, Müller de Quadros and Chen Pichler (2016; henceforth LQC) aim to take a broad view of what may count as evidence for such a model. In section 2.1, they explicitly “adopt the more general view [on bilingualism] that includes later learners who may well exhibit varying degrees of fluency with each language” (page 720). In this commentary I will highlight an issue that concerns something of a paradox in the study of bimodal bilingualism: there may well not be a pure sign language unaffected by a spoken language. In the proposed model, this does not affect the concept of having a distinct set of vocabulary items for the sign language, but it could affect the language-specific grammar for combining them, i.e., the morphological adjustments’ in the model.

LQC distinguish four groups of users of a signed and a spoken language: hearing people growing up in a (deaf) signing family; deaf children with a CI who have early sign exposure; hearing late learners of a sign language; and finally deaf signers with primarily visual exposure to the spoken language (in the form of reading and speechreading). It is the last group that arguably forms the core of the deaf community: people who learn a sign language early in life and see it as their preferred language. The linguistic study of sign languages, and thus our understanding of the structure of sign languages, has focused on this group – often zooming in on the language competence and use of ‘true’ native signers that grow up in deaf signing families (including the second group in the list above). The sign language corpora that have been built for various sign languages in the last decade have all focused on deaf adults (excluding CODAs, deaf children, and KODAs), but have taken a fairly broad view on deaf people in the language community by not just selecting only signers with deaf signing parents. Typically, these corpora include signers whose onsets of sign exposure fell between birth and the first few years of life (e.g., Johnston & Schembri, 2006 for the Auslan corpus; Crasborn & Zwitserlood, 2008 for the Corpus NGT; Schembri, Fenlon, Rentelis, Reynolds,
Cormier, 2013 for the BSL corpus). They thus aim to represent the situation in Western countries that only a very low percentage of deaf people acquire the sign language from deaf signing parents, while still attempting to focus on the early learners. In fact, for some communities, it has been argued that the truly native deaf signer is an exception (Costello, Fernández, & Landa, 2008).

These sign language corpora have recently formed the basis for a diversity of linguistic studies. Our own studies on one such corpus, that of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT, Nederlandse Gebarentaal), investigated the use of spoken elements (mouthings) in dialogues. All dialogues featured two deaf signers of the same age group who had known each other for many years – often for their whole lives. These studies highlighted the frequency of mouthings with both content words and function words (Bank, Crasborn, & van Hout 2011; Bank, 2015). One interpretation of the findings is that spoken language words (typically silently articulated, in line with the addressee being deaf) are used as fillers: whenever there is no other linguistic function for the mouth during the production of a manual sign, such as articulating a lexical or adverbial mouth gesture (see Crasborn, van der Kooij, Mesch, Waters, & Woll, 2008, for a typology), the mouth will produce a spoken word. This interpretation would appear to suggest that the resulting code-blends are simply a matter of selecting a spoken translation equivalent during late vocabulary insertion, in line with the model proposed by LQC. Our findings indicated a more complex picture, however, illustrated by the examples below. We found cases of code switching, where one or more spoken language words are produced without any manual accompaniment, as in (1), where a spoken conjunction is inserted in a string of signs-with-mouthings. We also found cases of code-blending similar to example (12d) in LQC, as in (2), where the mouthing expresses a different meaning than the manual sign (both with the first and the last sign), together creating a ‘composite utterance’. Furthermore, we are presently investigating the use of nominal and verbal inflection in code-blends that are similar to (19b) in LQC, as in (3).

(1) NGT: SELF HANDICAP MEAN
Dutch: zelf handicap maar bedoel
self handicap but mean

‘[They’re] handicapped themselves, but [he] means…’

References are to the Corpus NGT sessions with time code (mm:ss) where the example can be found. They can be accessed in The Language Archive, at https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0004-F3D5-A@view.
Even though adult corpora like the Corpus NGT aim to focus on the subset of deaf signers with early exposure to sign language, we have demonstrated the use of the spoken language in at least one such corpus to be omnipresent. If this is the practice of daily communication between native and near-native signers with little to no auditory exposure to the spoken language, it is not unlikely that the spoken language has invaded all domains of the sign language. We are then faced with a substantial challenge in establishing what exactly the grammatical structure of the sign language is, if there ever was a pure sign language. If all we can do is label as ‘sign language’ what is unlike the spoken language, we would exclude the possibility that these two languages have features in common. Although there is not yet an adult ASL corpus to evaluate the impact of English in ASL interaction, there is some evidence that mouthings are used extensively in ASL as well (Nadolske & Rosenstock, 2007).

We are thus faced with a paradox, as the study of the different types of interaction of the two ‘codes’ in the field of bilingualism implies that there are indeed two codes that also exist independently of one another. For many, if not most sign languages, this is dubitable at best, which calls for a critical look at the nature of the sign language code in bimodal bilingualism. If we accept that all signers are minimally bimodal-bilingual, and possibly multilingual, the proposed model would simply apply to all signers. The nature of the sign-specific components in it is perhaps more of a theoretical problem than an empirical one, one could argue.

References


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