

Perspectives in Grammar Description of Sign Languages

Péter Zalán Romanek

(Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

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Grammar description is essential for preserving and exploring the linguistic diversity of sign language communities (in line with Hale, 1992, Kadanya, 2006), while there are many issues concerning reproducibility, sustainability and data stewardship concerning the documentation of sign languages (see Palfreyman, 2022). The paper explores current issues in sign language grammar description in five areas: (a) how data collection methods are constructed and conducted in relation to Deaf sign language users' linguistic knowledge, (b) how data analysis affects the understanding of sign languages in their academic contexts, (c) what considerations have arisen in the presentation of sign language grammar description, (d) what issues emerge in the collaboration between linguists and sign language communities, and (e) what benefits the documentation-based approach can offer in describing sign language grammar. The empirical data is based mainly on exploratory interviews with twelve sign linguists from around the world who have worked on sign language grammar and have contributed their experiences and insights. For the analysis of the transcribed interviews, deductive content analysis is used with pre-defined categories. The results of the content analysis of the interviews provide preliminary findings on (a) the notion of grammar description for and in sign languages, (b) the challenges and possibilities of modality-related description models, (c) the usability, representability and accessibility of linguistic data (Holton, Leonard & Pulsifier, 2022, Good, 2022), (d) the role of sign language grammar descriptions in academic and other contexts where professionals work with sign languages (Mithun, 2006), and (e) the nature of collaboration between linguists and sign language communities (Ameka, 2006, Yamada, 2007, Guity 2022). The preliminary analysis reveals that there the grammar description projects are social practices embedded in negotiations in academia and communities and the sustainable and usable grammar description projects can be nurtured within language documentation framework, through series of negotiations between academia and communities of sign language(s). Finally, based on the findings, we will discuss ongoing issues on the role of language modality, language documentation, and linguistic diversity in the description of sign language grammar in the light of collaborative research (Rice, 2018).

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