

Diachronic corpus of European Sign Languages of the 18th-19th centuries

Lenka Okrouhlíková
(Charles University, Prague)

Keywords: Czech Sign Language, diachronic corpus, historical sign database, sign language families, sign languages

The emergence of European Sign Languages is usually associated with the establishment of institutionalised deaf education in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Due to their modality, sign languages do not have a written form; we can only refer to printed or manuscript materials, which capture signs through written descriptions, less often through pictures; some texts describe the formation of signs.

Our focus is on Czech Sign Language and the sign languages that have probably influenced it: Austrian, German and French. The first step was to compile a list of all usable texts, collect them in digital form and analyse them (Ferrand, 1784; Épée, 1786; Knoll, 1788; Eschke, 1811; Dégerando, 1825; Mücke, 1834; Reich, 1834; Czech, 1836; Schmalz, 1838; Blanchet, 1850; Jarisch, 1848, 1851; Brouland, 1855; Péllisier, 1856; Lambert, 1865 etc.).

The diachronic corpus will then be rather a lexical linguistically processed database of signs excerpted from the collection of texts, converted into a machine-readable form, provided with meta-linguistic tags related to the original text, an ID gloss in the original language, Czech and English, a transcription of the written description and/or picture of a sign. The phonological annotation of a sign's components will be documented in as much detail as possible, i.e. type of sign, handshape, orientation, place of articulation, movement, nonmanuals, if indicated. Equally important will be the annotation of the motivation of the signs and their iconic or metaphorical nature (also in relation to the components).

This database represents the first step in building a material base to change the approaches of diachronic sign language linguistics, a discipline on the periphery of interest (cf. Woodward: 2011; Reagan: 2021; Power, 2022). With a few exceptions, historical relationships between sign languages have been derived from synchronic data through comparative lexicostatistical methods, and based on extralinguistic connections such as historical, geographical, and educational ones. Our approach is different, based on sign language archaeology.

Signs in the database can be compared to reveal the possible relatedness of sign languages and reclassify them into families. We are faced with incomplete records of signs and difficulties distinguishing whether identical or similar signs are signs with the same ancestor, a borrowing, or a coincidence (false cognates) given by iconicity. Cross-sign language comparison of 19th-century historical signs can partially answer the question of to what extent sign language was genuinely universal in continental Europe (cf. Reuschert, 1909).

References

- Blanchet, Alexandre-Louis-Paul (1850), *Petit dictionnaire usuel de mimique et de daktylogie à l'usage des médecins et des gens du monde* In Blanchet, Alexandre-Louis-Paul. *La Surdi-Mutité traité philosophique et médical*. Tome I, 2^e partie, Paris: Labé, unapaginated.
- Brouland, Joséphine (1855), *Langage mimique Spécimen d'un dictionnaire des signes*. Paris: mp. de l'Institution Impériale des Sourds-Muets.
- Czech, Franz Herrmann (1836), *Versinnlichte Denk- und Sprachlehre mit Anwendung auf die Religions- und Sittenlehre und auf das Leben*. Wien: Gedruckt und in Commission der Mechitaristen-Congregations-Buchhandlung.
- De l'Épée, Charles Michel (1786/1896), *Dictionnaire des sourds-muets*. Paris: J.-B. Baillièrre et fils.
- Dégérando, Joseph Marie (1827), *De l'éducation des sourds-muets de naissance*. Paris: Chez Méquignon l'ainé père.
- Eschke, Ernst Adolf (1811), *Taubstummen-Institut zu Berlin: nebst einer Abhandlung: von der Zeichensprache der Taubstummen*. Berlin: Amelang.
- Ferrand, Jean (1784/1897), *Dictionnaire des sourds-muets et precedé d'une préface par le Dr. J. A. A. Rattel*. Paris: J. B. Baillièrre et fils.
- Jarisch, Hieronymus Anton (1851), *Methode für den Unterricht der Taubstummen in der Lautsprache im rechnen und in der Religion*. Regensburg: Verlag von G. Joseph Manz.
- Jarisch, Johann Anton (1848), Über den Unterricht der Gehörlosen. In *Jahrbuch für Lehrer, Ältern und Erzieher*. Prag: In Kommission bei Kronberger und Ržiwnak, s. 39–56.
- Knoll, Romedius (1788), *Katholische Normalschule für die Taubstummen, die Kinder und andere Einfältigen*. Augsburg: bey Nicolaus Doll.
- Lambert, Louis-Marie (1865), *Le langage de la physionomie et du geste*. Paris: Jacques Lecoffre.
- Mücke, Johann (1834), *Anleitung zum Unterrichte der Taubstummen in der Lautsprache nebst einigen Bemerkungen über die Geberdenzeichen der Taubstummen*. Prag: Gottlieb Haase Söhne.
- Pélissier, Pierre (1856), *Iconographie des signes faisant partie de L'enseignement primaire des sourds-muets*. Paris: Imprimerie et librairie de Paul Dupont.
- Power, Justin M. (2022), Historical Linguistics of Sign Languages: Progress and Problems. *Frontiers in psychology* 13(818753). 1-17.
- Reagan, Timothy (2021), Historical Linguistics and the Case for Sign Language Families. *Sign language studies* 21(4). 427-454.
- Reich, Carl Gottlob (1834), *Der erste Unterricht des Taubstummen mit angefügten Declinations-, Conjugationstabellen und einer Zeittafel*. Leipzig: Verlag von Leopold Voß.
- Reuschert, E. (1909), *Die Gebärdensprache der Taubstummen und die Ausdrucksbewegungen der Vollsinnigen*. Leipzig-R.: Komission-Verlag von H. Dude.
- Schmalz, Eduard (1838), *Ueber die Taubstummen und ihre Bildung, in ärztlicher, statistischer, pädagogischer und geschichtlicher Hinsicht; nebst einer Anleitung zur zweckmäßigen Erziehung der taubstummen Kinder im älterlichen Hause*. Dresden, Leipzig: Arnoldischen Buchhandlung.
- Woodward, James (2011), Some Observations on Research Methodology in Lexicostatistical Studies of Sign Languages. In Mathur Gaurav & Donna Jo Napoli (eds.), *Deaf around the world: the impact of language*, 38-53. New York: Oxford University Press.