

Grey areas in sign language structure

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The theory of language structure guides our investigation into various sign constructions. Corpus-based and corpus-driven studies have unveiled several 'grey areas' or ambiguities in Swedish Sign Language (STS) concerning lexical signs, depicting signs, fingerspelled signs, pointing, and constructed action/gestural enactment. Not only the hands serve as basic linguistic components, but also different body parts such as the torso, shoulders, head, facial expressions, gaze directions, and mouthing.

The presentation will discuss data annotation, an essential process for adding linguistic information (Johnston, 2019; Mesch, 2023). An ID-gloss in cooperation with the lexical database is required for consistency, and annotation conventions are continually developing (Mesch et al., 2024; Öqvist, et al., 2020). For example, incorporated modifiers are excluded at the gloss tier, e.g., EASY.DEGREE changes to the lemma EASY at the gloss tier, while DEGREE moves to the modifier tier.

However, there is ambiguity at the lexical, morphological and syntax levels, such as between collocations (e.g., SWEDISH CHAMPION) and compound signs (e.g., BEE^HIVE or BEE^FORM@ds) (see Brennan, 2001; Lepic, 2019); fingerspelling spans both ends of the lexicalization spectrum - from lexicalized, fixed forms to productive forms (e.g., FAST@fs or FAST) (Occhino et al., 2024); spatially modified time utterances (e.g., TIME-FORWARD or TIME-FORWARD-FROM); mouthing variations (e.g., full or reduced mouthing) (Mesch et al., 2021); parts of speech (e.g., interjection THANK or verb SAY-THANK) (Börstell et al., 2016); home sign or gesture (e.g., SEVERED-NECK). There is also ambiguity at the discourse level, such as between body acting and constructed action (e.g., PLAYING-DEAD) (Cormier et al., 2015).

Work linking the STS corpus and the STS dictionary (Mesch et al., 2024) shows no clear-cut division of linguistic information. One theory that may address this issue more effectively is construction grammar (e.g., Hoffman & Trousdale, 2013). After improving annotation conventions through teamwork, preliminary results will illuminate the contributions that each linguistic study can offer toward accurate language descriptions.

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