Book Reviews

A New Approach to Typologize Sign Languages

The authors propose that the movement features of signs can be adopted as a criterion to identify and typologize sign languages. The data came from the printed dictionaries of six sign languages: ASL, LIS, LSF, BSL, AUSLAN, and ISN, the last of which is a relatively young sign language in Nicaragua. Chapter 2 summarizes the methodology of data collection and statistical procedures adopted to confirm the clustering of these sign languages. A “genetic first—diaspora second” principle is proposed for determining the similarity among the sign languages. BSL and AUSLAN form a genetic cluster while ASL, LIS, and LSF form another. Adopting a diachronic perspective, they propose that BSL and LSF are “origin-bound” sign languages for their unadulterated development over time. ASL, LIS, and AUSLAN are “diaspora” sign languages and are hypothesized to have come into contact with indigenous sign languages before they were subject to a “mother sign language” influence like LSF on ASL or LIS and BSL on AUSLAN.

The typological evidence for the two clusters of sign languages is summarized in Chapters 3–5, while Chapter 6 provides generalizations of the study and Chapter 7 reports on testing them through ISN data. Results to support the “Adaptive Modularity Hierarchy” show that the direction “Away” is unmarked and overlaps readily with other directions on the hierarchy while “Rear” is most marked. Also, that movements are generally directed towards the signer’s body in 1H signs, the immobile H2 in 2H signs, and midsaggital plane for signs showing reflexive symmetry supports these researchers to put forward the “Anchor Principle” to capture this universality in sign language movement. The midsaggital plane is proposed to be the unmarked plane for signs reflecting reflexive symmetry, and curved movement among all these sign languages strongly favor a clockwise direction for 1H and 2H signs when this plane is involved. Variation in sign language movement is used as the basis on which these researchers justify to what extent these sign languages cluster diachronically. Interestingly, they claim that while ISN falls within the LSF family and borrows heavily from ASL, ISN has no genetic relationship with ASL.

Adopting movement as a defining characteristic for identifying and typologizing sign languages is innovative. It opens new discussions about the synchronic and diachronic development of sign languages based on analyzing the movement component of signs. This approach offers an alternative to examining the historical origin of sign languages, which enables the authors to propose the ‘genetic first—diaspora second’ principle to capture the relationship. The universal tendencies observed like the primacy of GOAL and Away for the three types of signs, while intriguing, begs an explanation in future research. For instance, the existence of the signer’s body or H2 as GOAL is predictable due to Place of Articulation. Additionally, one may wonder whether the constant use of H2 as GOAL is semantically motivated. In sign language grammar, events or states may be captured by using H1 and H2 to encode the arguments involved, as well as movement to depict their relation. This area calls for more research. Methodologically, the movement characteristics are based on the documented signs in six sign languages in printed texts. Given that movement is dynamic, data analysis would benefit by reviewing video clips rather than printed records and more sign languages.

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