

Signed Languages as Minority Languages

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In this presentation we first discuss the reciprocal ways in which the study of the world's signed languages has benefitted from key concepts of cognitive linguistics, and cognitive linguistics has been enriched and expanded by the study of signed languages. In the second part of our presentation, we offer suggestions for how cognitive linguists can aid in maintaining signed languages as vital minority languages and can contribute to signed language communities by collaborating with and expanding opportunities for their deaf colleagues.

Much of the early work on signed languages was based in structuralist and formalist theory. As a result, the significance of properties of signed languages such as iconicity, metaphor, and metonymy was for the most part overlooked. As sign linguists began to adopt cognitive linguistic models, the significance of these aspects for the grammars of signed languages began to be revealed. Cognitive linguistic principles have been used to explore new areas of the grammars of signed languages, such as fictivity, body partitioning and blending, and the role of mental spatial rotation in verb morphology.

More recently, Wilcox and his colleagues have begun to apply cognitive grammar to the study of signed languages. Reviewing this work, we will show how these studies are revelatory in accounting for such problems as the use of symbolic space to express antecedent-anaphor relations and nominal grounding, as well as addressing in a cognitively-informed way the problem of the relation between language and gesture.

In the second part of our presentation we will discuss how signed languages as minority languages can benefit from the cognitive linguistic endeavor. It can be argued that signed languages are inherently endangered languages. This is due to educational, societal, and medical pressures that work to diminish the vitality of signed languages and deaf communities. Although the practice of instructing deaf children in a natural signed language is expanding in many countries, in others it is still far too rare (Hayashi & Tobin 2013). In countries where medical treatments such as cochlear implants are becoming more and more accessible under national healthcare programs, the vitality of signed languages and deaf communities has been shown to be negatively impacted.

Finally, using Japan as a case study, we will suggest ways in which linguists, working with native signers of Japanese Sign Language (JSL), can collaborate on projects incorporating usage-based, cognitive linguistic principles designed to collect, archive, and describe JSL. As a team consisting of hearing cognitive linguists and a deaf signer of JSL, we will suggest ways in which members of Deaf communities who wish to acquire or advance their linguistic knowledge and skills can be assisted by their cognitive linguist colleagues.

References

Hayashi, Akiko & Joseph Tobin. 2013. The power of implicit teaching practices: Continuities and discontinuities in pedagogical approaches of deaf and hearing preschools in Japan. *Comparative Education Review*, 58(1), 24-46.