07

Languages in Contact: The Lexicon and Morphology of Signed Languages in Contact with Spoken Languages

Benjamin GIBSON
(Temple University, USA)

ABSRACT

Contact linguistics has predominantly examined the effects of contact between two or more spoken languages that enter into contact. Signed language contact has only recently been examined. This research attempts to explore the lexical, semantic, and morphological similarities or differences between spoken and signed language pairs. American English and American Sign Language (ASL), Peninsular Spanish and Spanish Sign Language (LSE), and Russian and Russian Sign Language (RSL) were chosen as comparison pairs. The lexicon and morphology were chosen because the lexicon is the aspect of language that is the most vulnerable to influence in contact situations, and morphology is inextricable from lexicon because of its ability to create new words within the language. In order to carry out comparisons, first the morphology of the spoken languages was examined. Then, video dictionaries were consulted in order to explore four lexical aspects: parallel polysemy (words with multiple definitions, signs correspond to the word), non-parallel polysemy (words with multiple definitions, signs correspond to the definitions), multifunctionality (words or signs that belong to more than one lexical category), and compounding. The morphological aspects were explored through a combination of video dictionaries and published research on the signed languages in question, along with some didactic books on ASL. The research was entirely qualitative, as a quantitative study of all words and signs in all three languages would have been impossible. With regard to the lexicon, it was found that parallel polysemy and compounding showed a clear connection between the spoken and signed language lexicons. Non-parallel polysemy and multifunctionality showed the opposite tendency.

When morphology was examined, it was found that signed languages are much more independent from the spoken languages, with their own rich morphology not matching that of the spoken languages through aspects such as signs that include multiple lexemes (intralexemic signs), directional signs that show verb/object agreement, noun/verb pairs, and the tense/mode/aspect system of signed languages.

The final conclusions show that spoken languages undoubtedly have affected signed languages in many lexical ways, but that the morphological aspects are much less vulnerable to influence and signed languages are capable of developing themselves intralinguistically.

The largest limitation in the study is that it examined signs and words in isolation. The signs may be articulated differently in conversation and real-life use, when they are in a context. The other main limitation is that it did not use informants for LSE or RSL, as they were unavailable. The only resources available were video dictionaries and research articles.

Further research to be conducted could include research into other grammatical aspects of the languages, such as syntax; research into language pairs in which the spoken

languages do not use an alphabet, as the three examined languages do; and historical studies to examine how signs change over time in comparison to spoken words.