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Phonological Parameters and their Effects on Phonological Variation in Hong Kong Sign Language

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ABSTRACT

Lexical and phonological variation is really prominent in sign languages. This study attempted to discover whether some phonological parameters in Hong Kong Sign Language are more easily misperceived than others, and whether this would be reflected in the variation due to the unfavorable signing transmission of Hong Kong Sign Language in the past decades.

The current study did a modified replicate of an earlier study on British Sign Language (Orfanidou et al., 2009). A lexical judgement task was conducted with 29 signers from three different groups, native signers, early sign language learners, and late learners. The task asked signers to look at a group of signs and judge whether they are real signs or not, which includes a specially designed set of non-signs. Data were coded according to parameter types when signers show misperceptions (i.e., when they misperceive a non-sign as a real sign and sign the real sign out). The results show that location induces the least number of errors among the three major phonological parameters for all three groups, compared with handshape and movement.

Data from two corpora were also checked to see whether such pattern was reflected in the variation patterns. It was found that in both corpora, phonological variation by location were with the least numbers, while there appear to be more handshape and movement phonological subvariants.

To sum, the actual variation pattern matched with the experimental data. It appears that signers would change the physically more variable elements in a sign when changes arose, and variation on movement and handshape were then 'created' and spread. Rather than looking at the frequently discussed social and linguistic factors, this study fills the research gap in sign language phonological and lexical variation studies by addressing the inherent features of the parameter themselves which have shown to play a role in the formation of the variation patterns.

REFERENCE

Orfanidou, E., Adam, R., McQueen, J.M, & Morgan, G. (2009). Making sense of nonsense in British Sign Language (BSL): The contribution of different phonological parameters to sign recognition. Memory & Cognition, 37 (3), 302-315.