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Arbitrary Signs Are More Stable Than Iconic Signs: Evidence from Taiwan Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language

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ABSTRACT

Sign language vocabularies seem to show greater diversity in the degree of conventionalization. More specifically, more arbitrary signs are more stable through time, while iconic signs are more voluntary to variation and historical change. In this paper, we provide evidence for this pattern from two sister languages in the Japanese Sign Language family, i.e., Japanese Sign Language (JSL) and Taiwan Sign Language (TSL). JSL was brought to Taiwan by teachers of deaf education in 1910's when the first two deaf schools in Taiwan were being founded (Smith 2005). By examining the cognates in these two languages, it was found that most of the cognates preserved in TSL were abstract concepts with arbitrary form-meaning mapping. On the other hand, concrete concepts with more iconic form-meaning mapping show higher variation between TSL and JSL.

Two sets of word lists were used to elicit data from deaf signers of TSL and JSL for lexical comparison. The first set is a list of 50 lexical items that are labeled as having a North-South dialectal variation in TSL. The variation has been attributed roughly to some regional varieties of JSL (i.e., Tokyo-Osaka). Four phonological features of McKee and Kennedy (2000) were adopted for coding lexical signs. Among these 50 lexical items, 24 of them are either identical or similar between TSL and JSL and can be assumed to be cognates. These 24 cognates are mostly abstract and non-iconic concepts or substances with no fixed shape, with only two iconic concepts. Moreover, some iconic signs show very high variation in JSL. For example, there were four ways of signing PIG among the 13 signers from Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Mie. All the variations are distinct from TSL.

The second set used to elicit data is the Swadesh 200-word list for counting cognates in test vocabularies (Swadesh 1955). Signs which are indexical in nature (e.g., pronouns, body parts) are excluded as proposed by Woodward (1993). It was found that signs of abstract and arbitrary concepts, e.g., colour terms, interrogative words (WH-words), stayed identical or similar in these two sister languages.

Compared with arbitrary signs which are more strict in form-meaning mapping, iconic signs have more space for imagination and innovation in form-meaning mapping, contrary to what is generally assumed that sign language vocabularies are more uniform due to iconicity (Meier 2002). This might explain the patterns we found in the diversity between TSL and JSL vocabularies.

Keywords: vocabulary, lexical comparison, Taiwan Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, arbitrariness, iconicity

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