

The Effects of Modality and Social Factors on Phonological Systems: Insights from Sign Languages

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Abstract

Sign languages offer linguists a unique window on the mechanisms of language, and in this talk two studies will be presented that show that i) crosslinguistic studies of sign languages and ii) studies of emerging sign languages demonstrate that we cannot understand the phonological code of a language (the abstract symbols) without also considering factors of communication modality and socialization within a community. First, with regard to communication modality, the different physiological structures involved in signed vs. spoken languages could potentially offer different solutions to how to organize the linguistic system. For example, it is often claimed that there is more simultaneous morphology in signed than spoken languages, and while this may be true to some extent for precisely these physiological reasons, we ask if the *cognitive load* involved in the externalization of language constrains how much simultaneity a language can handle. The limits and variation of simultaneous expression of morphophonology will be demonstrated using results from a crosslinguistic study that addresses agentive and plural morphology in American Sign Language, British Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language, and Italian Sign Language.

The second factor addressed in this talk is socialization, broadly construed, and I show how a phonemic system emerges in two young sign languages with different sizes and different practices of socialization. The phonemic system in this case is handshape, and the two sign languages are Central Taurus Sign Language (CTSL) and Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL). We ask if there are different effects on the phonological emergence of a handshape inventory that result from being in a relatively small, isolated deaf community with many hearing users (i.e., a village sign language, CTSL) versus being in a relatively large, diverse deaf community with few hearing users (i.e., a community sign language, NSL). The overall inventories, as well as specific sets of features, will be analyzed across the two languages and across “cohorts” (subgroups within both communities with different profiles of contact),

Both of these studies will compare the results from sign languages with comparable results from studies of spoken languages. We find that these two analyses of sign languages involving variation and emergence allow us to not only uncover important facts about sign languages, but also to offer new insights on longstanding issues in linguistics as a whole, regarding the nature of language in its phonetic and social contexts.