The Role of Historical Research in Building a Model of Sign Language Typology and Variation

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Synchronic analyses of modern sign languages can often mislead investigators about the structure of the language and the origins of its constructions, leading them to assume a "universality" of particular types of forms and processes and causing them to overlook the "particular genius" of a given sign language. It is essential to accurately trace the full linguistic and historical context of specific related expressions, forms and paradigms across time in the signed language medium. With emergent methodology for the reconstruction and comparative analyses of signed forms throughout the history of any given signed language, missing links in sign language genesis and evolution can be re-forged, and observations on sign language typological variation and universals will naturally emerge.

One key breakthrough is the computer integration of multiple data sources such as historical films, dictionary entries, annotations and written descriptions of signs and observed processes across time periods spanning three centuries of American Sign Language and its precedent LSF. Analyses of sample data sets made possible via the architecture of this platform reveal the overall patterns guiding lexicalization, metaphorization and grammaticalization. Historical research and documentation is key in recognizing the emergence of morphology in the French Sign Language family in a deeper way and revealing the roots of the synthetic processes observed for contemporary word formations.

Another key breakthrough is recognition of the diverse contributions which frame the evolution for an emerging sign language, such as the home sign systems of Deaf isolates, young sign languages in new communities, and cross-linguistic contact registers. The various types of sign language communities and varieties each have a place and a natural role to play in research on Sign Language typology and universals. It is possible that such research will ultimately link sign language research with the even broader research on human gesture, language origins, and species capability for language.