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Historical Sign Language Database Architecture
and Historical Linguistics Methodology

While the 40-year history of modern sign language research includes impressive achievements which have advanced our knowledge, narrow research agendas have limited our knowledge as well, particularly affecting the design of historical databases for sign language corpora.

During the workshop, we will share the architecture and historical linguistics methodology for several model databases for historical sign language research. The database platform developed in the United States integrates corpora from multiple data sources such as historical films, dictionary entries, annotations and written descriptions of signs and observed processes during time periods spanning two centuries (Supalla and Clark, in press). Initial work in integrating proto-grammar data is also represented in a sample set of data from early French Sign Language, in order to test the historical relatedness of ASL to the French Sign Language Family.

Material from a historically unrelated sign language family will also be presented, demonstrating the diverse typological and social paths of sign language evolution. Here, we focus on the emergence of the JSL gender system in a highly indigenous social context, arising through the process of optimalization of a borrowed gesture (Supalla and Osugi, In prep.). Regional variation data shed light on its later spread to neighboring sign languages in Asia and change within the Japanese Sign Language family (Smith, 1990, Osugi and Supalla, 1998).

A key focus of the workshop is the feasibility of this approach to accurately trace the full linguistic and historical context for the expression of, for example, kinship and gender (Supalla 2004, Supalla 2008), which undergo extremely interesting changes already documented by historical linguists for spoken languages, such as relexicalization, cliticization, polysemy, and dialect divergence (Givon 1971, Hopper and Traugott 1993). Missing links in sign language genesis and evolution can be re-forged, and observations on sign language typological variation and universals of Sign Language change will naturally emerge.

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