

THE CONATIVE MORPHEME AS A SPECIAL TYPE OF IMPERFECTIVITY IN SIGN LANGUAGES

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Research Question

The paper inquires whether DGS, BSL, ASL (German Sign Language, British Sign Language, American Sign Language) and presumably in a number of other documented sign languages exhibit morphemes that encode imperfectivity. Since imperfective is the natural counterpart to perfective, one would assume that there are some imperfective morphemes available in documented sign languages.

Analysis

The paper considers a number of aspectual morphemes for imperfective markers in the analysis: (i) continuative morpheme, (ii) iterative morpheme, (iii) habitual morpheme, (iv) hold morpheme and (v) conative morpheme. For example, the continuative morpheme appears with situation types of activities and accomplishments, due to its feature of duration. When it occurs, the default reading is that the event is unbounded.

The analysis suggests that there is indeed one marker of imperfective in ASL: the conative morpheme, a marked type of imperfective. Continuative and iterative morphemes, which contribute to situation type, are not imperfective markers. Habitual and hold morphemes are also situation type morphemes and also do not have anything to do with viewpoint; rather, they coerce generalizing states and accomplishments respectively.

Discussion

First, one might arrive to the conclusion that there is no viewpoint morpheme for the general imperfective in the sign languages under study. However, this is not to say that the open meaning of imperfective is absent from these sign languages. Rather, this is carried by neutral viewpoint, which can have an open or closed interpretation.

Second, the paper discusses the cross-linguistic perspective on conative meanings in a number of (spoken) languages including Russian, English, Greek, Latin, Navajo, Digueno and Masa.