

Compound structures in alternate sign languages: new insights from Khoisan hunting signs

Oral/poster

While the field of sign language typology remains sparsely researched, recent studies have established a dichotomy of “primary” and “alternate” sign languages (Kendon 2004; Zeshan 2008; Pfau 2012). Primary sign languages are full-fledged systems acquired by deaf people as their L1, while alternate sign languages are “kinesic codes” (Kendon 2004), developed by the hearing members of a speech community for use in special circumstances that preclude vocal communication. Among the latter are monastic sign languages, the Aboriginal sign languages of Australia, and Plains Indian Sign Language used among the native American groups of the Great Plains region. All languages of this type show certain similarities in structure. Recently, hunting signs used among several Kalahari Khoe-speaking groups of Southern Africa have been found to belong to the type of alternate sign systems (Fehn & Mohr 2012).

This paper analyses compound structures in a subset of five alternate sign systems. While the introductory analysis discusses differences and similarities of compound structures in those alternate sign languages linguistically documented, the paper also includes recent findings from Khoisan hunting signs (Mohr & Fehn 2012) used among the Ts'ixa and ||Ani. The characteristics analysed are syntactical/phonological structure, morphological composition and semantic set-up.

Compounds in primary sign languages phonologically and syntactically appear as one sign (Meir 2012). Although alternate sign language compounds appear to form one unit syntactically, i.e. their inner order cannot be reversed (Pfau 2012), phonological assimilation and reduction processes cannot be observed (cf. (1) from Pfau 2012).

- (1) HARD[^]WATER [CisSL]
 'ice'

Therefore, the compound could not only be interpreted as ‘ice’ but also as ‘hard water’. This seems to be a major distinguishing criterion from primary sign language compounds.

Concerning the morphological structure of the signs, compounds in Aboriginal sign languages (Kendon 1988), e.g., are usually bimorphemic, Plains Indian Sign Language exhibits trimorphemic compounds among others (Davis 2010), while monastic sign languages exhibit compounds consisting of up to nine parts (cf. (2) from (Barakat 1975).

- (2) SECULAR+TAKE+THREE+O+WHITE+MONEY+KILL+CROSS+GOD [CisSL]
 'Judas'

Khoisan hunting sign compounds are either bi- or trimorphemic (cf. (3) from ||Ani hunting signs).

- (3) BEAK-CROOKED+DOT.PL+WINGS [l'uen]
 'guinea fowl'

Finally, Kendon (1988) mentions universal semantic patterns for several alternate sign languages, such as an internal ordering from the constituent with the most general meaning as the initial component to the constituent with the most specific meaning as the final one. This structure also applies to the Khoisan hunting signs, with slightly different orderings for mammal and bird referents (cf. (4) and (5)).

- (4) Mammals: [CL] horns/ears + fur pattern
(5) Birds: classifier/beak [+ pattern of feathers] + wings

In conclusion, compounds across alternate sign languages show similar structures with respect to the phonological, syntactic, morphological and semantic level. These results are central for the young field of sign language typology. Firstly, they confirm the classification of the Khoisan hunting signs as alternate sign system. Secondly, they strengthen the establishment of an alternate sign language class as opposed to a primary sign language type based on structural grounds.

References

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