

Towards Historical Sign Linguistics: The First Step

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The main theme of this presentation will be to develop a methodology for the comparison and reconstruction of lexical items in signed languages. As our first step, we will propose a way to describe forms of lexical items in Japanese Sign Language (JSL) and its supposedly related languages, namely, Taiwan Sign Language and Korean Sign Language. The lexical items to be examined here will be number expressions that are likely to be etymologically related, or in other words, are potential cognates. We will show that, a combination of the shapes of the five fingers, information as to whether adjacent fingers touch each other or not, and the orientation of the hand appear to suffice the purpose at least with number expressions. These composites were selected based on the perception of signers as to what make them “feel” that two varieties are “different.”

The proposed way of the description of the forms of signed expressions will then be examined as to how much it may contribute to the formalization and generalization of change in lexical items. The assumption behind this is that when there is a variety of an expression found in closely related languages, it is likely that these reflect some kind of historical change in these languages. It is also assumed that that this change is likely to have taken place relatively recently in the case of the JSL language family, and this influences the way to think about the examination procedure. Historical documentation is also available for some such changes.

The ultimate goal of this project is to be able to analyze the history of sign languages by taking advantages of the accumulated knowledge about language change in Historical Linguistics related to spoken languages, and developing a model of historical change that fits the data available from sign languages. This model may deviate from the models used in spoken language research to a greater or lesser extent. We demonstrate the potential for developing historical sign linguistics as a line of research, by showing some examples from the JSL family.