Argument structure in emergent sign languages

Dany Adone & Anastasia Bauer

University of Cologne - Germany

There are various mechanisms available in every natural language to mark arguments. Some spoken languages use complex verb agreement (i.e. cross reference on verbs as in some Aboriginal languages of Australia), while others rely on case marking, word order or a combination of agreement and word order. Studies on various 'established' Sign languages show that these sign languages may use both morphology and syntax (i.e. agreement and word order) to mark their argument structure.

In this study we argue that arguments are mainly marked via syntactic devices in an emergent sign language. We focus here on the young, newly developed Sign Language of Mauritius (MSL) which is approximately 40 years old. Based on elicited data (picture description task and short story task) collected from 50 signers from different age groups we have the following findings: first, we find subtle differences between generations of MSL signers in the use of word order and agreement morphology (SOV and SVO). We take this as evidence against the Critical Period Hypothesis that has been claimed to account for generational differences (cf. Kegl 2002). Second, the consistent and predominant use of SOV order (80 %) as well as the lesser amount of variation by the younger generations of signers (around 20 years of age) supports the view that MSL is developing as a SOV language. Third, MSL seems to have fewer agreement verbs as compared to other 'established' languages such as ASL, BSL etc.

Taken together with studies on other new sign languages such as Abu Shara Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), Israeli Sign Language (ISL) and Nicaragua Sign Language (NSL) we argue that syntactic devices are preferably used to mark arguments in the initial stages of language development. As/if morphology develops, morphological devices are then used to express argument structure.