Constructing corpora of African sign languages - an example from Mali

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Corpora of African sign languages are an indispensable resource, both for their linguistic analysis as well as for applied use. The African continent contains a wealth of sign languages, used in highly varying settings. The study of African sign languages will add significantly to our knowledge about various key question in current debates in the sign linguistic field. In addition, research is much needed for practical purposes, as interpreter services, sign language translation and sign language training for parents and professionals is unavailable to the majority of Deaf Africans. Also, a considerable number of local African sign languages are endangered due to the introduction of foreign sign languages.

An important first step towards a better understanding of African sign languages, both for academic and practical purposes, is the construction of sign language corpora.

Several corpus projects have been set up for, mostly Western, sign languages so far. Quality criteria emerging from these projects include the following. A multi-purpose sign language corpus should ideally contain a systematically collected sample of natural, representative signed discourse of a representative selection of native signers evenly distributed over a particular geographical domain. Metadata and informed consent are available of all signers in the corpus. The signed data should be annotated at various levels, including the gloss level and the translational level. The corpus should be consistent, machine-readable, searchable and stored in a non-perishable format in an open repository.

In our presentation, we will present our corpus project of Langue des Signes Malienne. We will present methodologies used for corpora of non-African sign languages. Then we will discuss to what extent they turned out to be useful for the documentation of Langue des Signes Malienne. Adaptations were motivated by several issues, which may be encountered in corpora projects of other African sign languages as well. These included the cultural specificness of stimuli material, the recording setting, and the aims of the recording. Also, issues of literacy demanded adaptations in the annotation process. Our paper will conclude with a preliminary summary of best practices in the construction of corpora of African sign languages.