

# Neologisms in Sign Languages: Linguistic Issues

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# Neologisms & lexical gaps

- Neologisms
  - New vocabulary – new words in spoken languages, new signs in sign languages
  - May be for new concepts (technology, processes, etc)
  - Or they may fill lexical gaps
- Lexical gap
  - Lexical item (word or sign) that does not exist in a language
  - Does not mean that concept cannot be expressed! Just that it might require different expression than one word/sign.

# What makes something a sign?

- Lexical signs (or lexicalized signs)
  - The type of signs found in dictionaries
- Form and meaning
  - Has conventionalized form and meaning, agreed within community of users
  - Also, form must fit the phonological patterns of that language

# Sign language phonology

- Basic parameters: Handshape, movement, location, orientation



TO-WORK

TO-TALK



NICE

HEALTH

British Sign Language examples

# Sign language phonology

- Phonological constraints identified in many sign languages:
  - Symmetry constraint, dominance constraint
- Phonological constraints which are language-specific
  - Handshape inventories



BSL SIGN



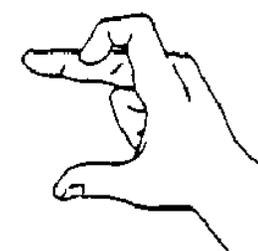
BSL REGULAR



American SL



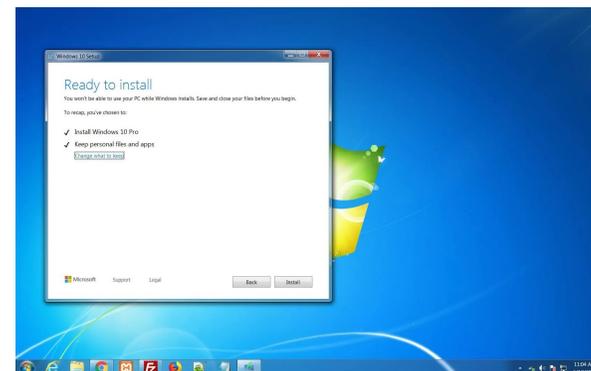
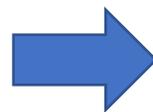
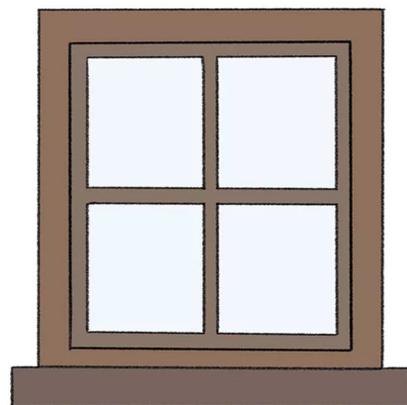
Taiwan SL



Portuguese SL

# Sign formation processes

- What linguistic processes result in new signs?
  - Lexical extension
    - English 'window': glass opening in house -> section of computer screen
    - Same process in sign languages e.g. BSL WINDOW (tracing outline of window)



# Sign formation processes

- What linguistic processes result in new signs?

- Compounding

- English 'greenhouse'
    - E.g. BSL BELIEVE



THINK



TRUE



BELIEVE

- Blending

- English 'mansplain'
    - E.g. ASL TRIPPING (Lepic 2016)



INVENT



TRAVEL



TRIPPING (i.e. on drugs)

# Sign types

- Over half of signed production is lexicalized signs – but not all

Sign type	BSL %(N=24,864)	Auslan % (N=64,436)	ASL % (N=4111)
Lexicalised signs	60.4%	65.0%	73.2%
Full fingerspelling	2.5%	5.0%	6.4%
Pointing signs	22.9%	12.3%	13.8%
Classifier signs	2.3%	11.0%	4.2%
Gestures	8.7%	6.5%	0.2%
Others	3.2%	0.2%	2.3%

BSL data: conversation only

Auslan and ASL data: mix of narratives, interview, conversation

Fenlon et al. (2014), *Lingua*

# Sign types

- Several other sign types beyond lexicalised signs

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fingerspelling



pointing signs



classifier signs

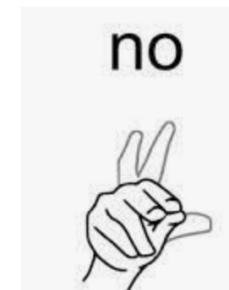


gestures/constructed action

- These other types (partly lexical and non-lexical) do not appear in sign language dictionaries in the same way and have different phonological patterns
- However many of these are sources of new lexicalized signs

# Other sources of new signs

- Non-lexical or partly lexical signs can become fully lexicalized – e.g.
  - Fingerspelling – e.g. ASL N-O vs sign NO
  - Classifiers – e.g. BSL upright-beings-come-together vs MEETING
- Borrowing from other sign languages
  - Place names e.g. AMERICA or ROME in BSL (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999)



ASL



Upright-beings-come-together



MEETING

BSL

Cormier et al. (2008), *SL&L*  
 Cormier et al. (2012), *Lang&Comm*

# Other ways that concepts can be expressed without lexicalized signs

- McKee & Vale (2022) study on Covid-related neologisms and other strategies in New Zealand Sign Language
- Paraphrasing/circumlocution
  - E.g. Pandemic > ILL^SPREAD^WORLD
- Hypernyms expanded to list
  - E.g. PPE > MASK, GLOVES, APRON

# SLs: unwritten languages, smaller vocabularies

- Lack of writing system → lack of standard dialect “grapholect” → smaller vocabulary
- Dictionaries of English contain hundreds of thousands of words
- Sign language dictionaries
  - Dictionary of British Sign Language/English (1992), contains approx. 1800 signs
  - Auslan SignBank contains around 4000 signs
  - BSL SignBank, around 2500 signs
- Similar to unwritten spoken languages
- Vocabulary size is not a limiting factor!
  - Novel signs can be created when needed
  - Other strategies also available too – and may co-exist with lexical signs

# Neologisms / lexical gaps

- Are neologisms and lexical gaps a problem in sign languages?
- When? Where? Why? How? For whom?

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Thank you!



# Neologisms / lexical gaps

- Are neologisms and lexical gaps a problem in sign languages?
  - Generally not amongst deaf people – not in everyday conversation
- When? Where? Why? How? For whom?
  - Where concepts are not discussed by enough deaf signers for signs/strategies to naturally emerge
  - E.g. Interpretation in educational or other specialist areas
- Issues in sign/neologism creation
  - Deaf involvement
  - Conventionalisation: Will the signs actually be used by the community?
  - When are neologisms appropriate vs not?
    - E.g. McKee & Vale 2022 study: In context of public health messaging re Covid – interpreters/translators working into NZSL “tried to avoid coining neologisms”. Primary concern was making messaging clear & accessible.