

linguistics of american sign language

linguistics of american sign language is a fascinating and complex field that explores the structure, use, and cognitive aspects of American Sign Language (ASL). As a fully developed natural language, ASL possesses its own unique grammar, syntax, phonology, and semantics, distinct from spoken English and other sign languages. This article delves into the various components that define the linguistics of American Sign Language, examining its phonological parameters, morphological processes, syntactic structures, and pragmatic functions. Additionally, it highlights the sociolinguistic context of ASL within Deaf communities, offering insights into language variation and change. Understanding the linguistics of American Sign Language is crucial for linguists, educators, interpreters, and anyone interested in the rich diversity of human language. The following sections provide a comprehensive overview of these key aspects.

- Phonology of American Sign Language
- Morphology and Word Formation in ASL
- Syntax and Sentence Structure
- Semantics and Meaning in ASL
- Pragmatics and Language Use
- Sociolinguistics and Variation in ASL

Phonology of American Sign Language

The phonology of American Sign Language refers to the study of its smallest distinctive units, often called parameters, which combine to create meaningful signs. Unlike spoken languages that rely on sound, ASL's phonological system depends on visual and spatial components. These parameters include handshape, location, movement, palm orientation, and non-manual markers such as facial expressions and body posture. Each parameter plays a critical role in distinguishing one sign from another, much like phonemes in spoken languages.

Phonological Parameters

ASL signs are constructed from five primary phonological parameters:

- **Handshape:** The configuration of the fingers and hand used to form a

sign.

- **Location:** The place on or near the signer's body where the sign is produced.
- **Movement:** The motion or action of the hands during the sign.
- **Palm Orientation:** The direction the palm faces during the sign.
- **Non-manual Markers:** Facial expressions, head movements, and body shifts that convey grammatical or emotional information.

These parameters function similarly to phonemes, serving as the foundational building blocks for meaningful contrast in ASL.

Phonotactics and Constraints

Phonotactics in ASL governs the permissible combinations of phonological parameters. Certain handshapes may not appear with specific movements or locations, and some combinations are phonologically disallowed. This system ensures that signs remain distinct and recognizable within the language. Additionally, coarticulation effects occur when signs are produced in sequence, influencing the transition between signs and contributing to the fluidity of ASL communication.

Morphology and Word Formation in ASL

American Sign Language morphology studies how signs are formed and modified to express different grammatical meanings. Unlike English, which predominantly uses affixes, ASL employs simultaneous morphological processes, where multiple morphological markers can be expressed at the same time through handshape, movement, and non-manual signals.

Types of Morphological Processes

In ASL, morphology includes several processes:

- **Inflection:** Modifications indicating tense, aspect, number, or person, often through changes in movement or repetition.
- **Derivation:** Creation of new signs by altering existing signs, such as changing handshape or orientation to form related concepts.
- **Compounding:** Combining two or more signs to create a new sign with a distinct meaning.

- **Reduplication:** Repeating a sign or part of a sign to indicate plurality or intensity.

Simultaneity in Morphology

One of the defining features of ASL morphology is simultaneity, where multiple morphological elements are expressed simultaneously rather than sequentially. For example, a sign can incorporate an inflection for plurality through repeated movement while simultaneously showing a facial expression that conveys negation. This contrasts starkly with linear morphological processes found in spoken languages.

Syntax and Sentence Structure

The syntax of American Sign Language governs how signs are combined to form grammatically correct sentences. ASL syntax is distinct from English and follows its own set of rules for word order and sentence construction. The language utilizes spatial grammar, where the physical location in signing space contributes to sentence meaning.

Basic Word Order

While ASL typically follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, variations such as Topic-Comment or Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) can occur, especially under topicalization or emphasis. The flexibility in word order is supported by non-manual markers and spatial referencing to maintain clarity and coherence. This flexibility allows ASL users to emphasize different elements within a sentence effectively.

Role of Space in Syntax

Spatial referencing is a crucial syntactic feature in ASL. Signers assign locations in the signing space to represent people, objects, or concepts and then refer back to these locations to indicate grammatical relations such as subject and object. This use of space enhances clarity and allows for complex sentence structures, including conditional and relative clauses.

Semantics and Meaning in ASL

The semantics of American Sign Language involves the study of meaning conveyed through signs, including lexical meanings and how context influences interpretation. ASL semantics is deeply intertwined with its visual-gestural modality, where meaning is often conveyed through iconic and metaphorical

signs as well as abstract representations.

Lexical Semantics

Lexical signs in ASL often carry meanings that reflect their physical form or movement, known as iconicity. However, many signs are arbitrary and must be learned as conventional symbols. The lexicon also includes classifiers—handshapes that represent categories of objects or people—and these play a vital role in describing spatial and descriptive information.

Semantic Roles and Thematic Relations

In ASL sentences, semantic roles such as agent, patient, and experiencer are indicated through spatial grammar and verb agreement. For instance, the direction of a verb's movement can show who performed an action and who received it. This system allows precise representation of meaning and relationships between entities in discourse.

Pragmatics and Language Use

Pragmatics in the linguistics of American Sign Language focuses on how context influences meaning and language use in social interaction. ASL users employ a range of pragmatic strategies to manage conversations, convey politeness, and express emotions.

Turn-Taking and Conversation Management

ASL conversation follows specific turn-taking conventions, including the use of eye gaze, body posture, and facial expressions to signal when a signer is about to start or finish a turn. These non-verbal cues are essential for smooth communication and differ significantly from spoken language turn-taking norms.

Deixis and Reference

Deictic expressions in ASL make extensive use of pointing and spatial locations to refer to people, places, and times. The use of space for deixis allows signers to anchor their discourse in the immediate environment or in abstract spatial frameworks, facilitating clear and efficient communication.

Sociolinguistics and Variation in ASL

The sociolinguistics of American Sign Language explores how social factors influence language variation, change, and identity within Deaf communities. Variation in ASL can occur based on region, age, ethnicity, and social context, reflecting the dynamic nature of the language.

Regional and Dialectal Variation

ASL exhibits regional dialects characterized by differences in lexical items, handshapes, and signing style. These dialects arise from geographical separation and the influence of different Deaf schools and communities across the United States and Canada.

Language Change and Contact

Language contact with English and other sign languages has influenced ASL, leading to borrowing and code-switching practices among bilingual signers. Additionally, technological advances and social media contribute to ongoing language change and the spread of new signs.

Identity and Language Attitudes

ASL serves as a core component of Deaf identity and culture. Attitudes toward ASL and its status as a legitimate language affect language policy, education, and community cohesion. Sociolinguistic research highlights the importance of ASL in maintaining Deaf cultural heritage and promoting linguistic diversity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the linguistic structure of American Sign Language (ASL)?

American Sign Language (ASL) has its own unique linguistic structure, including phonology (handshapes, movements, locations), morphology (modification of signs), syntax (sentence structure), and semantics (meaning), distinct from English.

How does ASL use spatial grammar in communication?

ASL utilizes spatial grammar by incorporating the location and movement of signs in three-dimensional space to indicate relationships between subjects, objects, and actions, allowing for complex sentence constructions.

What role do non-manual markers play in ASL linguistics?

Non-manual markers in ASL, such as facial expressions, head movements, and body posture, serve grammatical functions like indicating questions, negation, or emotional tone, making them essential components of ASL linguistics.

How is morphology expressed in American Sign Language?

ASL morphology involves the modification of signs through changes in movement, repetition, and direction to convey tense, aspect, number, and other grammatical information without separate words.

What is the importance of handshape in ASL phonology?

Handshape is one of the primary phonological parameters in ASL, crucial for distinguishing between signs; different handshapes can change the meaning of a sign entirely.

How does ASL syntax differ from English syntax?

ASL syntax often follows a topic-comment structure rather than the subject-verb-object order typical in English, and it frequently uses subject-object-verb order, reflecting its unique grammatical rules.

Can ASL be considered a natural language from a linguistic perspective?

Yes, ASL is a fully natural language with its own grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, developed naturally within Deaf communities, independent of spoken English.

What is the role of classifiers in ASL linguistics?

Classifiers in ASL are specific handshapes used to represent categories of objects and their movements or locations, playing a crucial role in depicting spatial and descriptive information.

How has technology influenced the study of ASL linguistics?

Advancements in video technology and motion capture have enhanced the study of ASL linguistics by allowing detailed analysis of sign parameters and facilitating better documentation and teaching methods.

What challenges exist in translating ASL to English from a linguistic standpoint?

Translating ASL to English is challenging because of differences in grammar, cultural context, and modality; ASL's use of space, facial expressions, and simultaneous information often lacks direct English equivalents.

Additional Resources

1. *American Sign Language: Linguistic and Applied Dimensions*

This book offers a comprehensive overview of American Sign Language (ASL) from both a linguistic and applied perspective. It covers phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics within ASL, along with sociolinguistic aspects and language acquisition. The text is suitable for students, researchers, and educators interested in the structure and use of ASL.

2. *The Linguistics of American Sign Language: An Introduction*

A foundational text that introduces the key linguistic features of ASL, including its unique grammar and syntax. The book emphasizes the visual-spatial nature of ASL and explores how meaning is conveyed through handshape, movement, and facial expression. It is accessible for readers new to sign language linguistics.

3. *Sign Language Linguistics: An Introduction*

This book provides a broad introduction to the study of sign languages, with a significant focus on ASL as a primary example. It discusses phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics of sign languages, highlighting the parallels and differences with spoken languages. The book also addresses deaf culture and language policy.

4. *Visual Language: Perspectives on American Sign Language Linguistics*

A collection of essays by leading scholars exploring various linguistic aspects of ASL. Topics include the visual grammar of ASL, non-manual markers, and the cognitive processing of sign language. This book is ideal for readers interested in advanced linguistic research and theoretical approaches.

5. *The Syntax of American Sign Language: Functional Categories and Hierarchical Structure*

This text delves into the syntactic structures unique to ASL, examining how functional categories are expressed through sign language modalities. It presents detailed analyses of sentence structure, verb agreement, and question formation. The book is targeted at linguists and advanced students focusing on syntax.

6. *Acquisition of American Sign Language*

Focusing on how individuals learn ASL, this book covers language development in deaf children and second-language learners. It discusses the stages of acquisition, the role of input and interaction, and differences between native and non-native signers. The book is useful for educators, linguists,

and psychologists studying language learning.

7. American Sign Language Syntax and Semantics: Papers from the 1979 Boston University Conference

This edited volume collects pioneering research papers on ASL syntax and semantics, providing historical context to the linguistic study of ASL. The contributions analyze sentence structures, meaning, and the interface between syntax and semantics. It remains a valuable resource for understanding foundational theories in ASL linguistics.

8. The Phonology of American Sign Language

An in-depth examination of the phonological components of ASL, including handshapes, locations, movements, and non-manual signals. The book explains how these elements combine to form meaningful units and the rules governing their distribution. It is essential reading for those studying the sound structure equivalent in sign languages.

9. Language, Gesture, and Space in American Sign Language

This book explores the spatial and gestural aspects that are integral to ASL communication. It investigates how signers use space to indicate grammatical relationships and convey complex meanings. The work bridges linguistic theory with cognitive and cultural dimensions of sign language use.

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