

Theme: Experiences of language documentation and description and linguistic theory at SOAS

Title: Testing language description through language documentation: the case of indicating verbs in the Auslan Archive Corpus.

Authors: Trevor Johnston¹ & Adam Schembri²

¹ Primary investigator—Auslan Corpus Project (ELDP MDP0088, SOAS), Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney.

² Project director BSL Corpus Project (ESRC RES-062-23-0825, UCL), Senior Research Fellow, Deafness, Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London.

Abstract

The Auslan (Australian Sign Language) archive and corpus, funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Program at SOAS, is the first large-scale sign language documentation project. It aims to bring together into one digital archive a representative corpus of a signed language in which the digital video recordings themselves, along with appended metadata and annotation files, will be openly accessible. Importantly, the annotation files of the corpus are designed to facilitate expansion and enrichment over time by various researchers. Sign language corpora will vastly improve peer review of descriptions of signed languages and make possible, for the first time, a corpus-based approach to signed language analysis. Corpora are important for the testing of language hypotheses in all language research. This is especially true of deaf signing communities which are inevitably young minority language communities. Although introspection and observation can help develop hypotheses, because signed languages lack written forms or well-developed standards, and have interrupted transmission and few native speakers, intuitions and researcher observations may fail in the absence of clear native signer consensus. The past reliance on the intuitions of very few informants and isolated textual examples (essentially inaccessible for peer review) has been problematic. Research into signed languages has grown dramatically over the past three to four decades but progress in the field has been hindered by obstacles to data sharing and processing. We discuss the new research questions opened up by the existence of signed language data in this new form and use the example of the use of indicating verbs in 50 annotated texts to illustrate how the new corpus-based approach to sign linguistics can be used to test long-standing assumptions about the grammar of signed languages. Indicating verbs are lexical signs in Auslan, and other signed languages, that have the potential to be modified spatially (with respect to direction of movement and/or location in the signing space) in order to track referents or indicate semantic roles. Previous work has suggested that the spatial modifications of indicating verbs represent examples of inflection marking agreement with subject and object. Over the decade this view has come to be challenged, suggesting instead that indicating verbs represent a typologically unique system of referent tracking that represents a fusion of language and gesture. Annotation and tagging of these signs in the Auslan Corpus provides important supporting evidence, particularly in highlighting the non-obligatory nature of spatial modification in these signs, and their complex interaction with other features of signed languages such as constructed action and ‘subject’ drop.