Sign languages: a very brief introduction

- To date, 137 sign languages have been registered
- Sign languages have been mostly studied in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas
- In many aspects similar to spoken languages (acquisition, grammar, pragmatics, change)
- Crucial difference between spoken and signed languages in the expression/perception channel

Classifiers and gender in sign language - the case of Korean Sign Language

Kang-Suk Byun
(Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen)

Inge Zwitserlood
(Radboud University Nijmegen)

Connie de Vos
(Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen)

Gender and classifiers: Areal and genealogical perspectives
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Sign languages make use of the manual-visual channel

- visual phonology
- use of space (for topological and grammatical purposes, e.g. inflection)

Handshape: thumb
Location: hand
Orientation: finger tips
Movement: outwards

to pay

he/she pays you

Classifiers in sign languages

- Almost all signed languages have a (verbal) classifier system
- Classifier typically appear on verbs that express the spatial existence or motion of entities
- Classifiers are expressed by particular shapes of the hands

The man walks to the truck.
Classifiers in sign languages

- Classifiers reflect referent characteristics, (animacy, shape) and are often iconically motivated
- Classifiers are linked to the subject or the (manipulated) object of the verb

The man walks to the truck.

Gender in sign languages

- Gender (i.e. masc, fem, neu) is absent in most sign languages
- Only 3 related sign languages have a gender system: Japanese, Taiwan, and Korean Sign Language
- This 2-way system is based on biological gender and only applies to animate entities (fauna, flora)

Korean Sign Language: Occurrence of gender

- Gender morphemes are expressed by the A-handshape (male) and the I-handshape (female)

Male marking  Female marking

Korean Sign Language: Occurrence of gender

KSL gender markers appear:
- in various signs, e.g. kinship terms and name signs

FATHER  MOTHER
Korean Sign Language: Occurrence of gender

KSL gender markers appear:
- in various signs, e.g. kinship terms and name signs
- as agreement markers on several verbs

Optional object marking

money  give  money  give#MALE
S/he gives money to someone  S/he gives money to a man/person.

Optional object marking

money  give  money  give#MALE
S/he gives money to someone  S/he gives money to a man/person.

Obligatory object marking (incorporated into verb)

you  I  raise#MALE
You raise me.
Korean Sign Language: Occurrence of classifiers

Gender handshapes as classifiers

Motorcycle: FEMALE(R) # MALE(L) FEMALE(R) # MALE(L) - move

A woman and a man go by motorcycle.

Korean Sign Language: Combination of classifier and gender

R-hand: FEMALE-move CLF(biped)-move follow with one's eyes FEMALE-move
L-hand: MALE

A man looks at a woman walking by.

Spreading of the gender system

- Japan colonized Korea from 1910 until 1945
- Japan colonized Taiwan from 1895 until the 25th of October, 1945
- The history of Japan's colonization in Korea and Taiwan and the words in these sign languages are deeply related to each other.
- Because of the influence of Japanese Sign Language, Korean Sign Language and Taiwanese Sign Language both share the grammatical characteristics and vocabulary, shown in the gender A-handshape and I-handshape, with Japanese Sign Language.

Emergence of the gender system

Emblem for 'girlfriend' in Japanese co-speech gesture

First borrowed into Japanese Sign Language as noun.

Transition to a morpheme meaning 'female'.

The male A-handshape, which contrasts with the thinner I-shape, emerged later.

Herlofsky (2007)
Conclusion

- While verbal classifiers are commonly found in most (but not all) sign languages, Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese sign languages are the only ones in which a gender system is attested.
- The system is based on biological gender and only applies to animate entities (fauna, flora). The male form can get a unmarked interpretation (person).
- The female form (I-handshape) emerged first, based on the Japanese emblem for girlfriend, and the male form (the A-handshape) emerged later.