

The distribution of lexical form building blocks in the core-lexicon of Israeli Sign Language (ISL)

The actual status of the units of the formation categories of the lexical form – handshape, location, orientation and movement – in the established lexicon of signed languages is still a subject of debate among scholars. Some scholars, including Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006), hold the view that lexemes are the only relevant units signaling meaning in the lexicon. Others claim that the lexeme's building blocks also convey meanings in the lexicon (Boyes Braem 1981; Brennan 1990; van der Kooji 2002). The present study examined the 'semantic contexts' in which each minimal unit appeared in ISL core-lexicon. The study is based upon semiotic theory. In semiotics, one may define language as a system of systems organized internally and systematically related to each other, which human beings use to communicate (Tobin 1997). This particular definition of language provides the semiotic linguist with a more holistic and isomorphic view of language than do traditional formal theories, which emphasize the autonomy of language and its sub-systems. The semiotic approach is founded upon the concept of the integrity of the linguistic sign, in which signals (of any kind: articulatory features, minimal units, word parts, words, etc.) and specific meanings are interlocked. The primary task of the semiotic linguist is to develop hypotheses about the invariant meanings connected with various signals in order to explain the nonrandom distribution of linguistic forms of that language in linguistic and situational discourse context.

Qualitative analysis, performed on a stratified sample of 560 entries taken randomly from the ISL dictionary show that: (1) the building blocks of ISL lexical forms are meaningful units; (2) the distribution of the formational units in the established lexicon of ISL is not random but rather motivated by the cognitive-perceptual features

attached to each one of them; (3) the established lexicon of ISL is composed of clusters of paradigmatic groups. The common core structure for all entries in the paradigmatic group is the incorporation of a specific basic semiotic unit into the form's construction serving as the 'prototype' for the entire semantic field. Hence, cognitive perceptual features not only motivate the distribution of the basic signifiers in the lexicon, but also contribute to the organization of the lexicon in general. Several paradigms were found to be unified around basic semiotic units functioning as 'emblematic' gestures in Hebrew discourse. The semiotic meaning, which apparently motivates the use of these emblems in spoken discourse, is not only retained when the units are incorporated in lexical forms, but also prompts lexical expansion.

These findings prove that invariant meanings motivate the distribution of the minimal semiotic units in all language and discourse contexts: the gestural context, the productive depicting forms context and the established core-lexicon context. They lead to the conclusion that iconicity in ISL is a major factor affecting all levels of the established language. Mostly, they reject the separation between semantics and phonology in ISL and manifest the need to develop more holistic approaches to genuinely understand and accurately describe the realization of language in the gestural-visual modality.

References

Boyes Braem, Penny. 1981. *Distinctive Features of the Handshape in American Sign Language*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Brennan, Mary. 1990. *Word Formation in British Sign Language*. Stockholm: University of Stockholm Press.

Kooij, E. van der, 2002. *Phonological Categories in Sign Language of the Netherlands: The Role of Phonetic Implementation and Iconicity*. Utrecht, The Netherlands: LOT.

Sandler, Wandy & Lillo-Martin, Diane. 2006. *Sign Language and Linguistic Universals*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Tobin, Yishai.1997. *Phonology as Human Behavior: Theoretical Implications and Clinical Applications*. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press.