

Lexical Variations and Diachronic Change in Hong Kong Sign Language

This paper reports the findings of a pilot study that investigates lexical variations in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL), focusing on the phonological processes involved in the variants and their role in driving diachronic change.

Lexical variants in HKSL fall into two types - separate variants and phonologically-related variants. The former are distinct signs that stand for the same concepts, whereas the latter bear some resemblance to each other in handshape, location, movement and/or palm orientation (cf. Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001). Phonologically-related variants typically arise from processes such as assimilation, deletion, etc., and they can reflect the overall directions for diachronic change. In American Sign Language, it is observed that, over time, signs become more symmetrical (i.e. two hands sharing the same handshape and movement), centralized (i.e. signs originally in a peripheral location moving towards the centre of the signing space) and fluid (i.e. complex movements/compound signs being simplified) due to the motivations for the ease of articulation and perception (Frishberg 1975, Woodward & Erting 1975). One purpose of this study is to find out whether these tendencies are also attested in the lexical variants in HKSL.

As a pilot study of our ongoing effort of documenting lexical variations in HKSL, our current data came from two groups of signers: (i) 4 older signers (aged 56-60) who graduated from the two earliest Deaf schools in HK which were set up in the late 1940s; (ii) 6 younger native signers (aged 26-34) who have signing parents graduating from these two schools. Each of the ten informants was asked to produce 145 signs which, in our informal observations, exhibit lexical variations in the Deaf community. Our data show that lexical variations in HKSL stem from both separate and phonological variants. Overall speaking, signs in HKSL do undergo different phonological processes to become more symmetrical, fluid and centralized, as reported in other sign languages. This suggests that phonological processes play a significant role in the diachronic change in the lexical items HKSL. However, our data show that signs do not all change at the same speed. Phonological processes mainly occur in signs whose original forms are not centralized, fluid or symmetrical. These signs change rapidly, resulting in a wide range of variable forms within and across generations of signers. In contrast, signs that are originally simple in structure remain relatively stable over time. In addition, some phonological processes are more frequently observed than others. Among all types of phonological processes found in our data, deletion of signs within a compound are far more frequent than handshape assimilation, centralization of POA and blending of signs inside compounds. This finding clearly suggests that elimination of prosodically heavy forms is the strongest driving force underlying lexical changes.

References:

- Frishberg, Nancy. 1975. Arbitrariness and Iconicity: Historical Change in American Sign Language. *Language* 51,696–719.
- Woodward, James., and Carol Erting. 1975. Synchronic Variation and Historical Change in American Sign

