ISCH COST Action IS1006 SignGram

Work plan for STSM to Universita' degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Sign action number: IS 1006
Title of the action: Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage
Action short name: SignGram COST Action

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STSM Title
Analyzing wh-questions in Catalan Sign Language: comparisons to other Sign Languages and design of experimental data gathering

General overview
The study of wh-interrogatives is central to any description of the grammar of any language. Any descriptive or comparative work must include this grammatical form because it is one of the well recognized sentence types. The relevance of wh-interrogatives relies not only on their universal nature but also on the fact that they are highly informative about syntactic structure. They can shed light, on the one hand, on the aspects of grammar that are subject to interlinguistic variation and, on the other hand, on those

that are part of the essential structure of all languages. Despite the fact that wh-interrogatives are a hot topic in linguistics, some aspects of the syntax of these constructions still remain mysterious.

As for SL wh-questions, the analyses of these structures are not devoid of controversy either. The discrepancies about the analysis of ASL wh-questions between the Boston group (Neidle *et al* 1997) and Petronio & Lillo-Martin (1997), (P&L from now on) are well known. In Europe, Van Gijn (2004) for Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) proposes a leftward wh-movement in line with P&L. On the other hand, Cecchetto *et al* (2009) studied Italian Sign Language (LIS) wh-questions and they provide a similar account to the one by Neidle *et al* (1997). They propose a rightward wh-movement and therefore a right-location of Spec,CP.

Moreover, Cecchetto *et al* (2012) have carried out crosslinguistic studies comparing wh-questions in different SL. This group has suggested a good analysis of the syntax of these constructions by comparing them with other structures in LIS, e.g. relative clauses. They have also run comparative experiments between Italian speakers and LIS signers. These experiments are an attempt to account for the syntactic particularities of LIS.

As for my contribution to LSC wh-questions, I have provided a similar account to the one given by Cecchetto and colleagues for LIS, i.e. Spec,CP is right located and wh-movement in LSC is rightwards. I have gathered a collection of data that give support to this idea, and I want to further support my claims through experimental work.

Outline / goal of the STSM
The main goal of the stage is to compare and exchange data from Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Catalan Sign Language (LSC). In addition, it will allow for the discussion of methodological techniques for eliciting wh-questions and experimental designs to test particular features of SL. The specific tasks will be to try to set up a joint analysis of wh-questions in LIS and LSC and to design an experiment to compare wh-questions in spoken and signed modalities. To that extent, the specific goals of my visit are threefold:

a) Comparison of data LSC – LIS: I will be able to exchange data from LSC wh-questions and compare them with LIS data. This work will help me improve the description of wh-questions in LSC that I have already written, and add up new features if necessary. This will help me ground firmly the forthcoming analysis of these constructions in LSC.

b) Develop / compare elicitation materials and strategies: I will get to learn from the elicitation methodology of the Italian group whilst sharing my own elicitation designs and experience.

c) Design an experiment: I will be able to go into the experimental side of their research (Geraci *et al* 2008) and find out if it applies to my project and, if relevant, how can I benefit from it.

This 3-week stage at the Università Milano-Bicocca will have an important benefit on my PhD dissertation, for the research carried out by the group in Milan, and, not the least, for the goals the COST Action pursues in characterizing and comparing European SL.

Planned methodology (concise)

3 weeks: from January 15th to February 7th

Week 1: Methodological and theoretical discussion on data gathering techniques.
    Comparison and discussion of data from both languages.

Week 2: Learning and discussion on experimental methodologies and results.

Week 3: Set up of experiment to be carried out back at Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

Planned methodology (extended)

Week 1:

Even though coinciding in the essential analysis that Spec,CP is on the right edge of the sentence and that wh-movement is rightwards, the model proposed by the group in Milan for LIS and the model I propose for LSC differ in some key aspects. One of the tasks in this stay will be to elucidate whether these key aspects are due to theoretically differing approaches or are called for by actual structural differences between the languages. In other words, the questions which will be answered are the following: are there different underlying mechanisms at work in each language? Or is it just the case that the same mechanism is just being accounted for in different ways? Is it possible to give a unified explanation that would cover both languages?

On another note, the gathering of spontaneous or semi-spontaneous data has proven crucial in the characterization of wh-questions, because the range of phenomena observed through them, and their breadth, are a lot wider than the ones obtained through grammaticality judgments. Nevertheless, wh-questions are delicate structures to elicit, because of their huge pragmatic overload. Different strategies elicit different types of wh-questions, especially when it comes to prosody and NMM behavior. Following the discussion of previous meetings during a recent visit of mine at Università Degli Studi de Milano Bicocca, it became clear that it is very fruitful to share and discuss the techniques used by each researcher, and deeper exchanges in this issue will surely be very useful.

Week 2:

I plan to get to know well the experimental designs the group in Milan has developed to account for some modality-based effects. Some experiments have been carried out comparing LIS signers and Italian speakers that are interesting to explain certain phenomena that are in principle unique to SL, such as rightwards wh-movement.

Week 3:

After the work done in the previous two weeks, I plan to design an experiment involving deaf signers and hearing speakers with the help and the expertise provided by the researchers in the group of Milan, to be carried out back in Barcelona. This experiment is aimed at knowing if the position of wh-elements is subject to primacy or recency effects. The underlying hypothesis is that in SL there is a prominence effect towards the right edge of the preference while in spoken language this effect gravitates to the left edge of the preference.

References

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