ISCH COST Action IS1006 SignGram

STSM final report

Work plan for STSM to Institut Jean Nicod, Paris

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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PURPOSE OF STSM:

The purpose of my STSM was to investigate assimilation in LIS among the different productions within the available corpus, which has been collected within a project called "Building a LIS Corpus" conducted by the University of Milan-Milano, Ca' Foscari University in Venice and La Sapienza University of Rome. Data were collected from 165 native and near-native deaf signers of LIS, across Italy. The corpus was coded using Elan, by deaf people, who annotated data from 8 italian cities.
By making use of some of the work that has been carried out on assimilation phenomena in sign languages and following the studies conducted for ASL, BSL and AUSLAN, I aimed to investigate assimilation in LIS among the different productions within the available corpus. I

began to investigate the phonological phenomenon of assimilation together with Dr Carlo Geraci (Institut Jean-Nicod CNRS, Paris) who, after having worked on the interface between syntax and phonology and on epenthesis, has now developed a research interest in this phenomenon.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM:

I started my work concentrating, specifically, on assimilation affecting signs with underlying "1" handshape, in order to investigate how these signs could be influenced by the preceding or following signs. In particular I focused on the hooked "1" handshape variant. During the first days I learned to extract the data from the already annotated corpus and I began to investigate assimilation across signs, by observing the various cases of assimilation and classifying the environment of occurrence.

We extracted data from five cities, the half of the total 10 cities, which constitute the Corpus, then I learned to tabulate them.

The second half of the week has been devoted to a preliminary quantitative analysis of the data, trying then, to explore various explanations for the facts.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OBTAINED:

Extracted and analyzed data were expected to prove a remarkable variation, concerning the influence of the preceding or following signs on sign underlying "1" handshape. First results showed that signer's choices of a "1" handshape hooked variant are not influenced by the features of preceding or following segments and they represent a low variability. On the total of 955 occurrences, only the 3% of signs (tokens) have hooked or not extended (closed) handshapes, almost all signs have an extended handshape, as in their citational form.

A remarkable variation, instead, has been found in the position of the thumb, specifically combinating the preceding and following signs.

Results showed that this combination influences the handshape of the sign much more than the preceding or following sign do.

This study wants to be a contribution to one of the goals set by SignGram Cost Action, that is the compilation of grammars of sign languages of Europe.

This project could pave the way for a more systematic analysis of the phenomenon of assimilation, which I will further develop after the STSM, in Italy, during my Phd.

The main language of the study has been Italian Sign Language (LIS) but extensions could be proposed for a cross linguistic comparison between LIS and French Sign Language.

Furthermore the empirical basis of this project could serve to evaluate some theoretical predictions as stated in the Prosodic Model for sign language phonology (Brentari 1998).