From Sign Language Typology to Cross-Modal Typology

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Over the past decade, research on an increasing number of diverse sign languages has demonstrated time and again that grammatical variation across sign languages is much more important than previously assumed (e.g. Perniss, Pfau & Steinbach 2007, Pfau, Steinbach & Woll 2012, Zeshan 2006, Zeshan & de Vos 2012). The systematic comparative research on sign languages, known as Sign Language Typology, identified the patterns of variation across sign languages, which is of great interest in its own right. However, on the basis of a better recognition of typological variability among sign languages, it has now become feasible to take a further step and to consider the nature of typologies of grammatical domains using data from a wide variety of both signed and spoken languages. This new field of investigation can be called Cross-Modal Typology (Zeshan et al, forthcoming).

I present a summary of typological variation across sign languages in three domains: negation (cf. Zeshan 2004), possession (Zeshan & Perniss 2008), and cardinal numerals (Zeshan et al, forthcoming). The evidence from each of these domains shows a substantial amount of typological variation among the sign languages considered (ca. 25-30 sign languages for each study). In addition, however, considering the sign language data alongside available spoken language data leads to different conclusions in each case. For negation, the data suggest that there are strong modality-specific aspects that result in sign languages showing a number of substantially different patterns from spoken languages. Therefore, sign languages as a whole could be said to constitute a sub-type with respect to some aspects of negation. On the other hand, the majority of data on possession show no overall distinction between signed and spoken languages. Instead, most constructions are instantiated in both signed and spoken languages alike. Instead of modality-specific factors, the domain of possession seems to be driven by modality-independent cognitive factors and aspects of semantics and grammaticalisation that operate across both modalities.

The presentation ends with conceptual and methodological considerations regarding the development of Cross-Modal Typology, and this is exemplified with data on cardinal numerals. I discuss the role of typological criteria and the way in which data from signed and spoken languages can be brought together systematically to make studies in Cross-Modal Typology both feasible and insightful.

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