

## Form – image – meaning: Why signs don't correspond to words

The central unit in lexicology and lexicography is a word, even though there is no standard definition of the term 'word', a situation due more to practical than theoretical reasons. For sign languages, it would seem natural to assume that the sign is the central unit, with a focus on the manual components of signs. The implicit assumption is that signs equal words. Continuing down this path, one could then assume that descriptive categories drawn from vocal languages (such as part of speech, word senses, polysemy and semantic vagueness, variation etc.) are also appropriate and adequate for signed languages.

However, if one wants to take into account the fact that in sign languages information is coded by visually perceivable non-manual as well as manual signals, not all of which are necessarily discrete lexical signs and whose sub-lexical components can have the status of phonemes as well as morphemes, then one can't get around integrating the motivation of signs in a lexicon model. Signs can be motivated directly by iconicity or indirectly by metaphor or metonymy and this has an explanatory and descriptive effect on how the lexicon of sign languages is structured. As there is no corpus-based dictionary of any sign language at the present time, the lexicon model is also crucial when corpus data are lemmatised (token-type matching) and lexical entries are defined in the process of building a lexical database such as we are now doing in Hamburg.

After a short review of the role of iconicity in sign language research, this presentation will introduce our lexicon model, which is based on the manual component of signs as its central unit but that doesn't equate signs with words. In contrast to words, most signs are motivated. Their iconic value functions as a contextual clue to make lip-reading of "mouthings" successful. Sign languages with mouthings (such as German Sign Language, DGS) thus differ from vocal languages not only by their visual-gestural modality, but also by the fact that they use symbols from two heterogeneous (vocal and visual) sign systems.

The iconic value which can be associated with the whole or with parts of the sign's form in this visual language mediates between its form and meaning. Thus, the structural linguistic model of the linguistic sign, which portrays form and meaning as two inseparable parts doesn't adequately describe the signs of sign languages. In our lexicon model, the iconic value is used as a valid criterion to distinguish between synonyms, homonyms and phonological variants as well as to show relations between citation forms and modifications. The question of polysemy also has to be looked at in a whole new way due to the fact that iconic signs can cover a far wider range of meanings than do words. By implementing a type hierarchy, conventional (usual) sign-word combinations can be separated from productive (occasional) ones during the process of token-type matching. By extending the type hierarchy to include qualified types, we are able to further differentiate and classify deviant token forms. This data-driven approach will allow an analysis of form-function relationships across all lexical entries.

One might associate motivated signs with the so-called „radicals“ used as semantic markers in the Chinese writing system, assuming that there is a conventionalised relation between iconic form elements and the meanings to which they refer. A crucial difference here is that a signer activates instantaneously iconic, metaphorical or metonymic motivations of signs whereas the graphical symbols were introduced ex post facto in the Chinese writing system as pre-defined symbols for different categories.