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## Wendy Sandler & Diane Lillo-Martin, Sign language and linguistic universals. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xxi+547.

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**Wendy Sandler & Diane Lillo-Martin**, *Sign language and linguistic universals*.  
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This book quite nicely fills a void long present in the sign linguistics literature. Most sign linguistics volumes have focused on one particular issue or theme (e.g. gesture, space, modality, classifier constructions), and/or covered topics within just one sign language – usually American Sign Language (ASL). It is rare to come across a book that gives a comprehensive overview of theoretical issues in sign linguistics research AND covers data from more than one sign language. *Sign language and linguistic universals* does both, reporting data and analyses on ASL but also substantially on Israeli Sign Language (ISL) and on the sign language used in Brazil, Língua de Sinais Brasileira (LSB).

The book is intended for linguists (or linguistics students) who have little or no knowledge of any sign language but do have a grounding in theoretical linguistics (particularly in generative frameworks). Thus, it is quite different from typical sign linguistics textbooks (e.g. Valli & Lucas 1995, Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999) which are aimed at students who know or are learning sign language and have no background in linguistics.

*Sign language and linguistic universals* covers the key areas within theoretical sign language linguistics, and also presents the research of the major players in the field. It attempts to synthesize the various perspectives, pointing out where different analyses converge or diverge from each other. Although Wendy Sandler & Diane Lillo-Martin note that their book is ‘not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the field’ (xvi), it is quite thorough. However, one drawback to the authors’ approach is that it results in a rather large book. At 547 pages, *Sign language and linguistic universals* is hefty, not a trivial amount of weight in one’s knapsack. That said, the book is very reasonably priced, and you get quite a lot for your money.

Unit I, ‘Introduction’, which comprises chapter 1, ‘One human language or two?’, gives, as its name suggests, an introduction to the book and asks the central question of what sign languages as visual/gestural languages have to tell us about linguistic theory. The authors explain that they endeavour to address this question in their book by covering the major subfields of linguistics (morphology, phonology and syntax). They justify their decision to concentrate on works and analyses within generative frameworks by arguing that sign languages provide an interesting testing ground for Chomsky’s notion of Universal Grammar, which is central to generative theories. This sets the stage for their later concern with questions about how sign languages can inform what we know about language universals, that is, those

characteristics or features of language that may be universal vs. those that are language- (and perhaps modality-)specific.

Unit II, 'Morphology', includes an introduction in chapter 2 ('Morphology: introduction') and is followed by chapters on 'Inflectional morphology' (chapter 3) and 'Derivational morphology' (chapter 4). In chapter 5, 'Classifier constructions', the authors outline the descriptive work that has been done on classifier constructions involving verbs of motion and location, which are known for their morphological complexity. They discuss how poetry and other artistic uses of sign languages utilize classifier constructions in very productive and creative ways. However, they neglect to point out that sign language users can exploit the iconicity of classifiers – and thus come up with very productive and creative uses – even in everyday discourse. It is true that some signers are more skilled at this than others, which may be similar to the way that some speakers of spoken languages are more skilled at creative uses of language than others. But on the whole, all sign languages that we know about are much more suited to creativity and productivity (particularly in their morphology) than spoken languages are. The authors point out (as many others have) that a major reason that sign languages are structured so differently from spoken languages is that the visual/spatial modality lends itself to visually motivated structures. The productive use of classifier constructions in a variety of situations and registers (and not just poetic uses) occurs for the same reasons: the modality allows and even encourages it.

Chapter 6, 'Entering the lexicon: lexicalization, backformation, and cross-modal borrowing', looks at the relationship between morphology and the lexicon in sign languages. Lexicalization, particularly in the context of classifier constructions, is a very tricky issue, so it is good to see that the authors chose to include it. This chapter also looks at borrowing and other ways that new signs typically enter the sign lexicon. The unit on morphology then closes with chapter 7, fittingly entitled 'Morphology: conclusion'.

Unit III, 'Phonology', comprises nine chapters. The authors begin in chapter 8, 'Meaningless linguistic elements and how they pattern', by defining the various phonological parameters of a sign. Then, in chapter 9, 'Sequentiality and simultaneity in sign language phonology', they consider how these parameters are similar to and different from phonological segments in spoken languages, particularly with regard to simultaneity and sequentiality. Here, Sandler & Lillo-Martin introduce a few models of sign phonology that rely on these notions, including Liddell & Johnson's (1989) Move-Hold model and Sandler's (1989) Hand Tier model. The next four chapters describe the major phonological parameters of 'Hand configuration' (chapter 10), 'Location: feature content and segmental status' (chapter 11) and 'Movement' (chapter 13), with chapter 12 covering issues relating to 'The non-dominant hand in the sign language lexicon' as articulator versus place of articulation. Chapters 14 ('Is there a syllable in sign language?') and

15 ('Prosody') cover the notion of syllable and prosody in sign languages, respectively. In several of these chapters, the authors discuss sign phonology models that are particularly relevant to the parameters/features related to these levels of linguistic organization. Finally, chapter 16, 'Phonology: theoretical implications', looks at what sign language phonology can reveal about general linguistic theory.

Unit IV, 'Syntax', begins with a unit overview in chapter 17 ('Syntax: introduction'), followed by a chapter on 'Clausal structure' in sign languages in general (chapter 18), including issues in basic word order and phrase structure, in which the authors explain their reasons for adopting a generative framework. Chapter 19, 'Clausal structure across sign languages', deals with syntactic phenomena that are known to vary across sign languages (e.g. auxiliary elements), and includes an in-depth look at the structure of the sign language used in Brazil, LSB. Chapter 20, 'Variations and extensions on basic sentence structures', considers the structure of determiner phrases, adjective phrases, possessives, classifier constructions and negative constructions. Chapter 21, 'Pronouns', covers syntactic phenomena related to sign language pronouns, examining issues such as reference and referential shift (with comparisons to logophoric pronouns in spoken languages), as well as overt and null pronouns in sign languages. Chapter 22, 'Topic and focus', examines the fact that all known sign languages seem to be discourse-rather than sentence-oriented, which obviously has effects on how information is packaged in sign languages. Chapter 23, '*Wh*-questions', reviews recent debates in the literature on whether *wh*-movement in sign languages is leftward or rightward. Chapter 24, 'Syntax: summary and directions', takes stock of syntactic issues within sign languages and raises the question of modality effects.

Throughout the phonology and syntax units, the authors present different phonological models and syntactic analyses, in each instance critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of the respective models. Among the various phonological models that are presented, the authors invariably end up arguing in favour of Sandler's (1989) Hand Tier model. When it comes to syntactic accounts, the authors favour the analyses proposed by Lillo-Martin and colleagues (e.g. Petronio & Lillo-Martin 1997). While Sandler & Lillo-Martin provide appropriate evidence for their conclusions, a reader with little knowledge of the sign linguistics literature needs to bear in mind the partisan nature of these two chapters, given that the authors are more theoretically neutral in the rest of the book.

The final unit of this book is Unit V, 'Modality'. Although the rest of the book provides a good summary of recent and important research within the areas of morphology, phonology and syntax, the sole chapter in this unit, 'The effects of modality: linguistic universals and sign language universals' (chapter 25), brings it all together and highlights some key elements seemingly unique to the sign language modality, and perhaps universal among

sign languages. These elements include the use of space for referential purposes (particularly pronouns and verb agreement), the use of simultaneity in sign languages, iconicity/motivatedness in sign languages, and, finally, the effect of language age on structure (i.e. all known sign languages are relatively much younger than established spoken languages, so much so that many comparisons have been made between sign languages and creoles).

The authors recognize – and reiterate throughout the book – that more research on other sign languages is sorely needed before we can begin to make real claims about language modality, especially about features that are prevalent in, and may even be universal across, all sign languages. One real strength of this book is the use of examples from various sign languages (particularly ASL, ISL and LSB). However, there are some cases where the authors base an argument on a single example. In chapter 10, Sandler & Lillo-Martin argue that hand configuration encompasses both handshape and palm orientation. As evidence they present the ASL example *OVERSLEEP*, a compound sign composed of *SLEEP* and *SUNRISE*. Sandler & Lillo-Martin suggest that this example provides evidence for Sandler's (1989) Hand Tier model, in which selected fingers of a handshape may assimilate, but if they do, then orientation is necessarily assimilated also. They then claim that '[T]HESE DATA motivate the representation of hand configuration in the Hand Tier model' (157, emphasis added), even though they have given only one example. While it is a telling example, more examples (especially from other sign languages) would have made their argument much stronger.

Although it is good and important that this book includes data and analyses on sign languages other than ASL, there does, in some cases, seem to be an underlying assumption (found in various sections throughout the book) that what holds for ASL probably holds for other sign languages as well. For instance, in the chapter on the sign language lexicon (chapter 6), the authors start by saying that many European sign languages and also ISL have 'a fair amount of mouthing of words from the ambient spoken languages' (104). They then offer arguments as to why such mouthings should not be considered to be speech that is produced simultaneously with sign. One such argument is that 'only a relatively small percentage of signs are normally accompanied by mouthing' (104). In many sign languages, this simply is not true. In British Sign Language (BSL), for example, mouthings are widespread (Sutton-Spence & Day 2001). The same has also been reported for many other European sign languages, as the authors themselves note earlier in the same paragraph. Although the claim about the low frequency of mouthings does not detract from the authors' larger point (which is that mouthings are not simply speech accompanying sign), it is yet another example of claims made about 'sign languages' that are actually only known (or believed) to be true for ASL. Again, this points to the need for more research on other sign languages.

That said, where examples are used in this book, they are appropriately illustrated and/or described. This is not a trivial matter. Because sign languages have no standard written form, it can be difficult to make sign language data accessible to sign-naïve audiences in written form. This is a problem for sign language researchers accessing descriptions of sign languages they do not know, but even more so for researchers who do not know any sign language at all. Fortunately, this book is relatively well-illustrated: there are an appropriate and adequate number of illustrations, photos, video captures, and descriptions of sign examples for all the sign languages described. (One would like to see more, but cost and space are always issues to consider.)

To conclude, I recommend this book to linguists interested in learning more about sign languages. Given the overall theme, the book would be of particular interest to those studying language typology. I would also recommend this book to students who have some background in theoretical linguistics (particularly in phonology and syntax), and to anyone who is interested in the nature of modality and human language.

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