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Review Of "Sign Languages" Edited By D. Brentari

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Sign languages (review)

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be made in any field of scientific inquiry. B's take on syntactic displacement, the provocation model, provides a fresh look at an old problem. In many respects, a proposal this bold and radical simply needs more time before its true overall merit can be successfully evaluated. As I have tried to indicate in this review, B's analysis of data groups together certain phenomena in an appealing and parsimonious way—ways that I had not considered prior to reading this monograph. From a conceptual standpoint, I have pointed to three fundamental ways in which the provocation model of constituent distal significantly departs from more mainstream approaches to minimalist theory. The ultimate question that any changes in theory must face depends on their 'virtual conceptual necessity', which has been the mantra of the MP since its inception. In light of the challenges that I see with the provocation model when compared with the mainstream approach to these conceptual issues, and their respective abilities to explain empirical data, at this time I do not view this model as a radical improvement over competing models. Again, a great deal of my skepticism rests on the lack of other studies from a provocation perspective—something that I think will take place in due course. In the end, I encourage other linguists to read this book and seriously ponder the merit of B's model, for it is through the diversity championed in the programmatic atmosphere encouraged in minimalist inquiry that our understanding of natural linguistic phenomena can be improved and the most effective, parsimonious way to model them can be found.

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Sign languages. Ed. by Diane Brentari. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xxi, 691. ISBN 9780521883702. $160 (Hb).

Reviewed by Donna Jo Napoli, *Swarthmore College*

Twenty-five chapters (including an instructive introduction) by fifty-two scholars offer information about over forty sign languages. Assessing how many sign languages there are in the world is difficult both because countries rarely include information about sign in censuses and because the determination of what counts as a language versus a less-developed gestural system is tricky. Still, the number of sign languages studied here is impressive, particularly since most here are genetically unrelated. This book is a treasure trove.

Many early studies of sign languages aimed to establish their status as bona fide natural languages and, thus, focused on properties in common with spoken languages. Once that basic issue was confirmed, attention turned to how modality differences affect grammar and the behavior of language communities, thus allowing us to advance our knowledge both of cognitive aspects of language and psychosocial factors pertinent to language use. The introduction to this volume beautifully lays out three advantages of considering sign languages in this regard. First, analysis

of a sign language can make clear what visual properties of the phonetic system motivate structural linguistic properties, opening the door for linguists to seek out what auditory properties of the phonetic system do the same in spoken languages. Second, iconicity in sign languages is readily accessible and apparent in a much wider range of data than generally found in spoken language, so its role can be examined closely. I would add that studying the ways in which sign iconicity yields to grammatical properties over time and the ways in which it yields to randomness over time (due to the inherent limitations of iconicity with respect to conveying isolated lexical items) can help us better understand the ways in which spoken language iconicity changes over time, as well as offer a perspective on the development and evolution of writing systems. Third, since new sign languages are emerging around the globe, study of sign languages offers data about the emergence of language that are otherwise unavailable. Already, study of sign languages (e.g. Nicaraguan Sign Language) has taught us that language evolution can proceed far more rapidly than had previously been hypothesized. To all these, one could add the advantage that studying sign languages offers us information on typology of language. Since sign languages use different articulators with different capabilities from those of spoken language and since their organization involves visual parameters as opposed to auditory parameters, possibilities for variation among sign languages come up that do not arise in spoken language. By looking at the ways that sign languages group together, we can enrich our inventory of the factors around which languages typologize in general and thus enhance our knowledge of language in general. In sum, if you are not already convinced that we no longer have to let the *lingu(a)* of *linguistics* limit our vision of our field, this volume will help remove remaining blinders, with articles written by renowned scholars (the contributors list is almost a who's who of sign linguistics) and touching on so many issues that linguists of any ilk can find something to dig into here.

Part 1 is on the history of sign languages and their generational transmission. From around World War I until the 1950s, Switzerland practiced sterilization of deaf people, forbade marriage among the deaf, and put deaf women in institutions, all in an effort to eradicate deafness. Today, eighty percent of deaf children get cochlear implants (CI), and typically do not sign. While deaf groups advocate use of sign, oral-only deaf people contradict them. Schools for the deaf have produced few graduates who qualify to enter universities. No universities have faculty positions specializing in sign language so little research has been done on Swiss sign languages. While sign languages are not officially oppressed, they are not officially recognized, and deafness is still considered a malady in need of cure. All this information is just part of the first article, by PENNY BOYES BRAEM and CHRISTIAN RATHMANN, which goes on to discuss in rich detail the situations of d/Deaf people and sign languages in Germany (where many deaf were killed during World War II, but today the Deaf community is strong and research is supported in universities) and the Netherlands (a strong bilingual education system, good Deaf community self-image and image in the ambient hearing world, increasing support of research on sign). The next article, by CLAIRE RAMSEY and DAVID QUINTO-POZOS, looks at these factors and others across Mexico and Latin America, where oralism in schools undermines the cohesiveness of Deaf communities and relegates sign language to marginal status. BRITA BERGMAN and ELISABETH ENGBERG-PEDERSEN's article looks at educational and societal situations of Danish, Swedish, and Finnish Sign Languages, examining whether they are genetically related (probably not) and related to French Sign Language (again no). In the article by JOSEP QUER, LAURA MAZZONI, and GALINI SAPOUNTZAKI, a tight link between educational policies toward deaf people and the ability of sign languages and Deaf communities to thrive is clear—with mainstreaming being a negative factor (sadly, given that mainstreaming is well intended, as a means to counter discrimination), as outlined for Greece, Italy, and Spain—though some Deaf communities have rallied in spite of obstacles. In an article by DOROTHY LULE and LARS WALLIN, we see how official governmental support enhances the image of a sign language, as in Uganda (the second country in the world to legally recognize sign language in the national constitution as the preferred language of Deaf people), but unless that support translates into economic initiatives, Deaf people cannot enjoy full societal participation. Further, the high status of written language can overwhelm a Deaf community that is not terribly self-aware, so it favors Signed English (a manually coded version of English) in

Uganda. Finally, PIOTR WOJDA shows the same favoring of Signed Polish in Poland, so much so that there are very few signers in Poland who genuinely use Polish Sign Language, which impedes linguistic analysis.

Like other minority languages, sign languages are endangered, educational policies being a major culprit. But additional militating factors include two atypical of spoken minority languages. First, the medical profession pathologizes deafness as something to be countered with mechanical aids and rarely advises families about sign; as the prevalence of CIs increases, sign languages are seen as a poor (and ever worse) second choice to oral language. Second, families of deaf children rarely have a positive attitude toward sign or Deaf culture since they are for the most part hearing and largely ignorant of Deaf matters, the result being that pride in Deaf culture is not passed down within families, but, instead, within communities that come together eclectically (or sometimes do not). Ironically, CI implants have become the standard of care, despite the fact that in these economies interpreters are often more available. By contrast, in developing countries d/Deaf people are almost invariably impoverished.

Part 2 takes up shared crosslinguistic characteristics and gets into material familiar to all linguists, though the data may be remarkably new to those without familiarity with sign languages. The first chapter, by HARRY VAN DER HULST and RACHEL CHANNON, is unique, however, in not looking at particular sign languages or at particular grammatical phenomena, but instead looking at writing systems in general and at those systems with 'success' for sign languages, such as the Hamburg Sign Language Notion System (HamNoSys). No explicit criterion is given of what success means here, but I suspect ease of transcription by researchers. The authors propose that since a more successful writing system for sign is a featural-level system (rather than a phoneme-level system, as in alphabets), the 'feature or feature group is the central cognitive unit for sign' while 'the phoneme is a central cognitive unit for speech' (172). (They do not discuss the use of *the* in one claim and *a* in the other.) I am aware of research on the potential implications that writing systems have on cognition, but unaware of research on the potential implications that cognition has on writing systems, so I see this article as highly innovative, laying out a research agenda.

We move now into more traditional issues, with a beautifully detailed overview of how verb agreement works in sign languages and which properties allow for variation (GAURAV MATHUR and Christian Rathmann). The question of whether verb agreement is a unified linguistic phenomenon across modalities or instead distinct but parallel phenomena in sign and spoken language is left open. SANDRO ZUCCHI, CAROL NEIDLE, CARLO GERACI, QUINN DUFFY, and CARLO CECCHETTO look at the evolution of a functional element from a lexical element—FINISH in American Sign Language (ASL) and FATTO 'done' in Italian Sign Language. The behavior of these morphemes with negation is best explained with a distributed morphology approach. The issue of clause structure and basic word order is addressed in RONICE MÜLLER DE QUADROS and DIANE LILLO-MARTIN's article on ASL and Brazilian Sign Language, genetically and geographically distinct languages. The authors argue that clauses with agreeing verbs have many functional nodes, while clauses with plain verbs do not, and they use that difference to account for their claim that word order is more flexible in sentences with agreeing verbs than in sentences with plain verbs. They conclude that the underlying order is SVO for both languages, but object shift and topicalization can front phrases. Further, focused material can be sentence-initial. While I have my own ideas about word order, this article leaves no doubt that generative models of syntax can be applied in the analysis of sign languages.

Perhaps the most brilliant article in this stunning collection is that on classifiers by Elisabeth Engberg-Pedersen, which looks at nine languages and demonstrates that many factors contribute to the form of a classifier in a given sentence, including lexicalization and visual analogy, but also metonymy, issues of functionality dependent upon context, attention focus, and ease of production and perception. DIANE BRENTARI and PETRA ECCARIUS discuss crosslinguistic and language-internal variation in handshapes, making a distinction among handshapes used in core lexical items, in foreign signs, and in spatial signs, and a distinction between distinctive and prominent phonological contrasts, the recognition of which together allows similarities between sign phonologies to be revealed. Syllable structure in ASL and Finnish Sign Language is examined by TOMMI JANTUNEN and RITVA TAKKINEN, with the conclusion that syllables contain one sequential

phonological movement and that core lexemes are limited to two syllables. SHERMAN WILCOX, PAOLO ROSSINI, and ELENA ANTINORO look at the development of a modal verb in Italian Sign Language, noting that grammatical morphemes can originate in gesture directly without passing through a lexical morpheme stage. RONNIE B. WILBUR's article on the semantics-phonology interface in ASL predicts various kinds of phonological movement (including handshape and orientation change) depending on the event structure of predicates, and suggests that since the options are based on the physics and geometry of the real world, they are potentially universal. This is a possible account for why sign languages look more similar to each other than spoken languages do. The final article in Part 2, by ROLAND PFAU and Josep Quer, looks at grammatical and prosodic roles of nonmanuals, including in lexical distinctions, as morphological modifications, and as syntactic markers, and argues that they must be considered in the grammar of any sign language.

    Part 3 is devoted to variation and change. A wonderfully comprehensive article on sign languages in western Africa, by VICTORIA NYST, lays out the history, distribution, and use of foreign sign languages (mostly ASL, used by the National Associations of the Deaf in education) and local village sign languages, a much-understudied group with interesting details given here. The impact of foreign sign on local sign is expected: prestige wins and local sign is endangered. KINDA AL-FITYANI and CAROL PADDEN compare sign languages across the Arab world using lexicostatistics. There is a high rate of genetic deafness due to the tradition of endogamy in Arab nations. Yet, sign language geography does not map onto that of the spoken languages. Instead, several are distinct, and geographic proximity does not always predict similarity. Palestinian and Jordanian Sign Languages are the closest, unsurprisingly; however, Jordanian and Kuwaiti Sign Languages are also similar—more so than two unrelated spoken languages—a fact they suggest follows from the iconicity of the modality. They also discuss recent attempts to foster a standard sign language across these communities. Next, CEIL LUCAS and ROBERT BAYLEY offer a sociolinguistic history of ASL that outlines the role schools for the Deaf played in language stabilization and variation. But mainstreaming in the past two decades is fracturing that. Additionally, contact with other sign languages is increasing, particularly via Mexican immigrants. So the patterns of variation touched on nicely here can be expected to change soon. A study of British Sign Language (BSL) and its daughters (creolized, I would add—BSL was introduced into schools where local sign was already in use)—Australian Sign Language and New Zealand Sign Language—looks at lexical, phonological, and syntactic change, and variation with respect to regional origin, age, and gender of signers (ADAM SCHEMBRI, KEARSY CORMIER, TREVOR JOHNSTON, DAVID MCKEE, RACHEL MCKEE, and BENCIE WOLL). As in other countries, oralism prevailed starting in 1880, but in New Zealand it continued until 1979, an interruption in sign that may be responsible for why New Zealand Sign Language is considerably more different from the other two than they are from each other. An article on East Asian sign languages, by SUSAN FISCHER and QUNHU GONG, shows the influence of written language on sign language (seen in Polish Sign Language in Wojda's article), with interesting complexities because of the writing systems. Another characteristic strikingly different from western sign languages is the lack of spreading of nonmanual features related to negation in Chinese Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language. A totally genius article is that on eye blinks and their reliability as indicators of an intonational phrase boundary, by GLADYS TANG, Diane Brentari, CAROLINA GONZÁLEZ, and FELIX SZE. Sign languages of Hong Kong, Japan, German Switzerland, and America are compared and the point is made: it is essential to have converging independent sources of evidence in order to draw conclusions about prosody in sign languages. Eye blinks turn out to consistently mark intonational phrases, but not exclusively in Hong Kong Sign Language, and both phrase-final lengthening and head nod can also be indicators. Furthermore, total sign duration is predictive of prosodic constituency. Another study of the development of sign from gesture, by MARIE COPPOLA and ANNE SENGHAS, looks at deictic pointing in Nicaraguan Sign Language, arguing that points progress to locatives and then to nominals. The volume ends with Carol Padden, IRIT MEIR, MARK ARONOFF, and WENDY SANDLER's look at two young languages, Israeli Sign Language and Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, focusing on verbs expected to use space iconically. Path movement more frequently goes from or toward the signer rather than, for example, from left to right, so the ten-

dency is to use the body as the subject argument. Perhaps the iconicity of body as subject is typical of young sign languages, and verb agreement that makes use of a fuller range of space develops more gradually; study of young sign languages provides novel evidence on grammar.

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Comparative and contrastive studies of information structure. Ed. by Carsten Breul and Edward Göbbel. (Linguistik aktuell/Linguistics today 165.) Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010. Pp xii, 306. ISBN 9789027255488. $149 (Hb).

Reviewed by Valéria Molnár, *Lund University*

This volume contains a collection of articles based on original contrastive and comparative research on information structure, most of which were presented at the conference Contrastive Information Structure Analysis held at the University of Wuppertal in March 2008. As the introduction states, the book is motivated by the editors' and contributors' conviction that a comparative and contrastive approach to information structure is beneficial in several respects: by providing insights into both language-specific and universal aspects of information structure and by clarifying the functional properties and formal representations of information-structural categories. A special merit of the book is that the editors draw attention to the distinction between a more general comparative approach and a more specific contrastive analysis, with several contributions clearly demonstrating the advantage of a specific contrastive perspective for grammatical description.

The articles of the volume discuss different languages, information-structural notions, and a variety of constructions, applying different perspectives (including language acquisition, diachronic development, and typological generalizations) and also taking various types of empirical data into consideration (e.g. introspective data, semi-spontaneously produced data, attested data from spoken child language, and adult language corpora). Nevertheless, the editors have managed to integrate the heterogeneous analyses and data of the eight articles into a whole not only by setting the comparative/contrastive perspective for all articles, but also by framing the volume with two additional excellent chapters, an introductory and a concluding one. While the 'Introduction' (1–14), written by the editors Carsten Breul and Edward Göbbel together with Alexander Thiel, provides a comprehensive presentation and well-founded assessment of the individual articles, the final article by Carsten Breul, 'On the foundations of the contrastive study of information structure' (277–304), is devoted to the discussion of methodological issues. Besides addressing the ontological and methodological aspects of contrastive information-structure analysis, emphasizing the heuristic specificity of contrastive linguistics, Breul also takes up some illuminating examples from several contributions (Lambrecht, Cohen, López, Skopeteas and Fanselow, Gast), summarizing relevant results of the volume.

The mapping of grammatical (syntactic and prosodic) structures and (discourse-semantic) interpretations is of central relevance in all articles, although the points of departure for the analyses differ. Whereas in several works information-structural notions and functions (like subinformativity, givenness, discourse anaphoricity, focusing, topicality) serve as tertium comparationis, showing various grammatical representations in different languages, others concentrate on certain forms and structures whose realizations depend on information-structural notions (clefts, reflexives, null subjects, interrogatives).

Volker Gast's work, 'Contrastive topics and distributed foci as instances of sub-informativity: A comparison of English and German' (15–50), belongs to the first mentioned group of papers, focusing on a specific aspect of information structuring, that is, the encoding of subinformativity in English and German. Sentences are called 'subinformative' if they answer the current