Verbal Predicates in Flemish Sign Language (VGT) and South African Sign Language (SASL)
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Research Question

In 2006 and 2007 we took part in a larger project on differences and similarities between SASL and VGT and between the South African Deaf Community and the Flemish Deaf Community. In the first part of this project a number of grammatical mechanisms and structures are being compared across the two sign languages, using a corpus consisting of similar VGT and SASL-data of a various nature. The overall goal of this grammatical part of the project is to contribute to a further understanding of the issue of the degree of similarity between unrelated sign languages. However, the different studies also mean a further exploration of the grammars of the two languages involved. A part of the grammatical comparison focused on word order issues (published in Vermeerbergen e.a. 2007). Here we shall focus on a small part of that specific study, i.e. on sentences with two or more elements which at first sight seem to function like verbal predicates. We shall present a cross-linguistic analysis of these sentences and try to determine the grammatical/typological status of the verbal-like elements.

Research Design

The methodology for the cross-linguistic study was driven by the Volterra et al. (1984) picture elicitation task in which eighteen pairs of drawings are used to elicit sentences describing three distinct types of states of affairs (henceforth SoA):

1. six pairs of non-reversible SoA (where only one of the illustrated entities, the animate or human one, would be likely to be the agent of the action),
2. six pairs of reversible SoA (where either illustrated entity could possibly be the agent), and,
3. six pairs of locative SoA (presenting the motion and/or location of two entities relative to each other).

For each sign language, two male and two female (near-)native signers representing two different regions per country contributed to the data collection. Their interlocutors were always (near-) native signers from the same region. The data were afterwards transcribed and analysed.

Results and Discussion

The analysis and comparison of the data yielded a number of sentences with two or more elements which needed further scrutiny. These elements seem to function as verbal predicates but they may not all belong to the (same) class of verbs:

- A first type includes sentences with SIT, STAND and KNEEL-DOWN on the one hand and sentences with localising classifiers on the other. Both may attribute a specific locus to the referent involved in the signing space, but only the first are (derived from) verbs. An example in VGT is:

  GIRL SIT CAKE “eat-cake”.

  One possible explanation for this type of sentence in VGT is that they are influenced by Dutch (“Het meisje zit cake te eten.”), but their occurrence in
SASL contradicts this hypothesis. SIT could be regarded as a semi-auxiliary (as in Dutch), as a postmodifying adjective (“the girl sitting”), as an embedded clause (“the girl who is sitting”), but in our opinion it seems to be very similar to classifiers functioning as localising devices (which in our SASL-data occurred more frequently than the SIT and STAND constructions).

- A second type comprises examples featuring GIVE (which does not occur in SASL). In VGT one example is:

BOY GIVE GIRL PUSH.

The question is which grammatical status can be attributed to GIVE: ditransitive lexical verb (with both GIRL and PUSH as objects), monotransitive lexical verb in a split sentence construction (see further down), light verb, auxiliary, or preposition (cf. Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2004)?

- Split sentences (Volterra et al. 1984; Vermeerbergen 1996) make up a third major type which occurs in both sign languages. A SASL-example is:

BOY PUSH GIRL ”stumble-forward”

which can be analysed as a split sentence but also as a pivot construction since the GIRL is the object of PUSH and at the same time the subject of the following predicate: S V O/S V, yet alternative analyses are also possible.

- A fourth type are the so-called verb sandwiches (Fischer & Jannis, 1990) where two instances of the same verb or two semantically related verbs appear in one sentence, again occurring in both sign languages. Examples are:

  - CAR TOW TRUCK TOW
  - GIRL EAT CAKE “eat-cake”.

Verb sandwiches appear to be relatively common across different sign languages and several interpretations have been suggested. They shall be dealt with in the paper.

This study shows that there are important similarities between the two sign languages studied, some of which were not really expected since they are unrelated, but at the same time it also shows that there are remarkable differences. More importantly, it shows that the verbal categories that are traditionally proposed for sign languages (e.g. plain verbs, agreement/indicating verbs, etc.) may need to be revisited.

References


