

What you always wanted (your students) to know about sign languages

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Abstract

As linguists we share a fascination for language and languages – for how diverse languages are and, on the other hand, how similar. When teaching students, we usually have a primary goal of providing them with insight into how this all works and awakening their curiosity. Spoken languages share many common properties, but also show a wide range of diversity. Zulu and Xhosa, for example, are both agglutinative languages, have morphological classes and are tonal - in contrast to English or Afrikaans which are fusional, have no classes and are not tonal.

At first sight sign languages being in the visual-spatial modality would seem to be quite distinct from all spoken languages, but in fact spoken and signed languages do share common properties. Intriguingly they also have some unique modality-specific features. For example sign languages have more iconicity than spoken languages and use this iconicity in the lexicon but also some aspects of grammar. Their structure also displays much more simultaneity than that of spoken languages.

The aim of this lecture is to illustrate on the one hand some of these common features and on the other to demonstrate some of the characteristics unique to the visual-spatial modality. These examples are ones that can be integrated into general classes on linguistics, giving students a broader perspective on the range of human languages.