Using Etymology to Link ASL to LSF

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Abstract: The science of etymology involves studying changes in the form and analysis of words. Research on the etymology of specific signs in ASL can also provide us with the tools to link the history of ASL to early French Sign Language (LSF), to which it is related, and also to modern LSF.

Translation

Chapter 1 Recognizing Folk Etymology

Scientific etymology documents the entry of a word into the language and follows its form as it changes through time to the present-day modern form. Changes in word forms are due to well-studied social and linguistic forces, such as borrowing a word from another language. But it is also common for speakers of a language to create folk etymologies – stories about where words have come from that may not be historically accurate – to explain the form of a word. These informal theories about the history of words are different from scientific etymologies and must be kept separate from scientific research on the actual history. These folk etymologies can also change over time. In ASL, we can see an example in the changing folk etymologies for the sign for “America”. It was, at different times, viewed variously as a depiction of America as a “melting pot”, the log cabins of the New World, and the split rail fences of the Frontier. Folk etymologies often arise when there is a gap in our knowledge about the true history of a sign and in sign languages are based on iconic resemblances between the form of a sign and objects and ideas of that period. As word form and the perception of the word shifts over time, the accepted folk etymology will often change as well.

Chapter 2 Integrating Etymological Sources

As we uncover historical texts and films of early versions of a sign language, it is important to create guidelines for scientific etymological research. It is also important to consider the role of folk etymologies, those natural community theories about words. While they do not provide us with actual historical documentation about the earlier forms of a sign, they nevertheless provide valuable information about the linguistic analysis of a sign at the time, leading to an understanding of its perceived relationship to other signs and its function during that time period. For this reason, these periodic analyses and re-analyses should also be recorded and included in scientific etymological study.

Chapter 3 Seeking the French Connection

The historical relationship between LSF and ASL and the degree of relatedness of historical and modern signs between these two languages is a rich area for etymological study. In previous research conducted by James Woodward, a list of common concepts was used to elicit signs from members of each sign language community. The comparison of these signs revealed a striking 60% level of cognate forms – that is, 60% of the signs he examined across the two languages had a clear similarity in form, suggesting that they were historically related. For example, the forms for the concept “keep,” differ in many aspects and also have quite different folk etymologies in each community. They would not likely be considered cognates. However, an examination of related forms, such as SUPERVISE, and the older forms from historical NAD Gallaudet Lecture Films for LOOK AFTER and KEEP leads us to reconstruct a single antecedent form for both languages. Apparently once old LSF signs were borrowed and used in America, independent processes of phonological change and reanalysis led to the divergence in the sign forms for KEEP in the two languages.

Chapter 4 Revealing Periodic Reanalyses

To successfully develop a full scientific etymology for a sign, “periodization” is necessary. In our research, we establish the periods of time and use for each of the changing forms and folk etymologies of a sign by noting and recording the dates of their use in our primary source materials, such as texts and films. The signing of Edward Miner Gallaudet in the Gallaudet Lecture Film of 1910 provides us with documentation to distinguish an early, middle and modern period for the etymology of the sign NAME. In the filmed example, the sign is made with 2 crossed index fingers, a depiction of the “x” used as a signature by people who were illiterate. Somewhere between this early period and the modern period, an interim period existed where a growing awareness of the possibility of initializing signs led to a conscious re-analysis and change of this sign to incorporate an “n” handshape. In the modern form, there is no longer an awareness of initialization: we no longer think of the handshape of the sign NAME as containing an “n.” Thus we see that the full etymological history of a sign can be documented as successive stable periods for each analysis and form of the sign.

Chapter 5 ‘Thumbing’ through the Sources

A case study of the sign for the comparative and superlative suffix in ASL can serve to illustrate the procedure and guidelines for constructing an etymology from historical records. The relevant material is drawn from the Dictionary of ASL, written by Stokoe, Casterline and Croneberg and published in 1965. This dictionary lists a great deal of information, both historical and current for the time. One entry for the comparative and superlative form, the “A” handshape with an upward movement, is listed as a suffix. It was appended to adjective signs, such as LARGE. Below is the full text of this entry from page 2 of the DASL.

From this information, we know that the sign was functioning as bound morpheme during this specific time period. To understand the historical evolution of this suffix in ASL, it is important to note that language users do not typically innovate grammatical particles. Rather, grammatical forms like suffixes arise through frequent use of multi-word constructions, which are cyclically reanalyzed and ultimately grammaticized, displaying a reduced or compressed pronunciation in the final stage of change. In the case of this ASL suffix, the 1965 Dictionary provides a partial etymology, referring to the use of the definite article in the French language to distinguish comparative from superlative. The challenge here is to reconstruct the process and stages by which this form began in LSF as an

independent sign and evolved into an ASL suffix by the time of the writing of the 1965 Dictionary of ASL.

An important document in our reconstruction research is a dictionary of LSF written in 1856 by Pierre Pélissier, a deaf French instructor. The dictionary by Pélissier includes many examples of older LSF signs with the same A-handshape as the ASL comparative and superlative suffix. These signs range from a static one-handed sign serving as a definite article (like the English ‘the’) to a moving one-handed sign meaning “each,” two-handed signs meaning “with” or “or,” and even 2-sign constructions meaning “more than”. Many of these signs have similar forms and meanings in modern-day ASL. The distinction between the forceful ASL -est form and the contrasting shorter, softer movement of the ASL -er also existed in LSF. Thus, we can safely determine from a comparison of forms recorded in 1856 and 1965 that the modern ASL comparative and superlative construction is derived from a much earlier LSF morphology.

The subsequent development of the ASL comparative and superlative suffix paradigm can be investigated by referring to historical records in the 1920’s, midway between the two time periods in question. In the Higgins 1923 dictionary of ASL, the form has the meaning of “chief” and is still an independent sign, used in much the same way that modern signers use the form to mean “boss”. In modern times, not only is the form a suffix, but additional constructions using this suffix have arisen, as seen in modern dictionaries, with forms including good, better, best and “the very best” which is a 2-handed sign. While this last form does not appear in the 1965 Dictionary of ASL, it is common in my own dialect, and it is similar to the old LSF sign meaning “or”. Thus the use of the form to show an increasing level of a quality has continued to the present day, with synchronic variation. Moreover, the early rule for combining ADJ+ comparative/superlative is still present in the modern ASL paradigm.

Chapter 6 Accommodating the Outliers

Changes in the form of individual words across time takes place in the context of the structure of the language as a whole and the relationships of these individual words with other semantically and grammatically related words in the language. An illustration of this point can be seen in the case of two synonyms for “bad” in early LSF, where we can see the different changes that occur in these words and their ultimate function in modern ASL. Form 1, which resembled two hands turning downward, is the origin of the twisting downward movement at the end of the modern ASL sign BAD. Form 2, in which 2 V-handshapes cross over each other, is identical in form to the modern ASL sign WORSE, (with a shift in meaning since that time). Interestingly, in modern ASL the comparative/superlative forms attach selectively to modern WORSE but do not combine with the modern BAD. There are additional signs which likely derived from these original forms as well. The modern sign TROUBLE has a similar form to the first antecedent sign. The modern sign CARELESS/RECKLESS has a similar form to the second sign. In spite of this divergence of forms and their meanings and grammatical functions, both of the forms seem to have been adopted into the same semantic domain of negative signs, just as other signs such as BEAUTIFUL were adopted into positive semantic domains. The comparative/superlative paradigm applies across these domains, showing the hierarchical structure of language.

Chapter 7 Contributing Etymologies to Sign Language Archeology

In conclusion, the various examples of etymological research presented here show us that the field is a rich one and there is much work to be done. As we move forward, it will be important to observe the hallmark of scientific etymological research: the documentation of our sources, such as the 1856 Pélissier text or the 1965 Dictionary of ASL. Moreover, we must keep in mind that research on the early and ongoing history of LSF, conducted by those who have access to resources in the French language, is likely to yield valuable information as well. This will enable us to compare forms in LSF and ASL within and across far-flung time periods. Documenting the forms of signs scientifically and noting the folk etymologies which are traditional in the LSF and ASL communities will provide us with valuable data for learning about the many influences on language change in any given time period. In documenting processes such as the development of compounds, grammatical particles, and grammatical paradigms from sequences of independent words in syntactic constructions, we will learn as well about the principles guiding language change.

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