

INTRODUCTION

This volume features a selection of the papers presented at the International Colloquium on “Verbal and Signed Languages. Comparing units, methods, and constructs” held in the Università Roma Tre, Rome, in October 2004¹. The colloquium was designed to foster a better understanding of verbal and signed languages through a confrontation between specialists in these two fields, as a starting point for promoting the working out of shared constructs and methodologies.

We conceived the idea of such a comparison at a crucial moment in the history of linguistics on the one hand and of the study of sign language on the other one.

In the first phase of sign linguistics history, from Stokoe’s (1960) seminal work on American Sign Language through the 80’s, when many signed languages of the world began to be investigated (see for example Stokoe and Volterra, 1985), these languages were studied with an overall “assimilationist” approach. With few exceptions (e.g., De Matteo 1977, Mandel 1977, Boyes Braem 1981), most work aimed at highlighting the deep similarities between verbal and signed languages, so finally making light of differences (e.g. Klima and Bellugi 1979, Wilbur 1979, Liddell 1980, Padden 1988).

That work provided valuable information and profoundly changed our views of signed languages, so finally leading to their recognition as full-fledged human language systems. Yet, important differences between signed and verbal languages remained fairly unexplored or underestimated.

Since the 90’s a shift in perspective has gradually been taking place, and a body of research on the peculiarities of signed languages began to emerge. From variegated theoretical perspectives, researchers directly or indirectly questioned the earlier accounts of the architecture of signed languages and proposed more or less substantial revisions of the acquired knowledge (see, among others, Wilbur 1990, Brennan 1992, Engberg-Pedersen 1993, Uyechi 1994, Armstrong, Stokoe and Wilcox 1995, Hulst and Mills 1996, Brentari 1998, Cuxac 2000, Pizzuto and Volterra 2000, Meier 2002, Meier, Cormier and Quinto-Pozos 2002, Emmorey 2003, Liddell 2003).

On the side of linguistics, on the other hand, a confrontation on some foundational issues was and still is deeply needed. After being concentrated for decades mainly on abstract intuition data, linguistics has been gradually discovering the wonder and risk of “real language facts”: spoken language, broken varieties, socially differentiated registers, vernaculars, discourse phenomena, corpuses, the spoken/written conflict and many other “atypical” phenomena have been entering its investigation area, so forming at the same time a terrific resource and a fatal thread for its generalizations. It was time for it, then, to come to the encounter with codes based on quite distinct modalities, such as gestures and mimicry, in order to check similarities and differences and to reflect on which may be, if any, the common grounds of human communication.

It must be noted that while sign linguistics has undisputedly gained acceptance as a formal science, sign language research has had thus far scarce or no impact on the other half of the world – linguistics of verbal languages (with few exceptions: see e.g. Simone 2007 – first ed. 1990). Most constructs and methodologies that linguistics uses are strictly modeled on the peculiarities of verbal languages. Little attention has been invested to ascertain if and to which

¹ The term ‘verbal’ is used here, after Simone (2007), to refer to both the spoken and the written forms that several (albeit by no means all) languages can take. It is important to recall that, to date, no signed language has autonomously developed a written form. As mentioned below and referred to in some contributions to this volume (e.g., in Blanche-Benveniste’s), it is possible that future investigations of verbal vs. signed languages will induce us to re-assess more accurately to what extent constructs and categories used in our descriptions of verbal languages are based on written rather than spoken language.

extent what we know on verbal languages demands a revision in depth of its methodology and foundational assumptions.

In this frame, what we aimed at through the Colloquium was to stimulate a debate about some cross-linguistic topics of foundational, theoretical and methodological import. They included the linearity and arbitrariness principles, the definition of units and levels of analysis, the encoding of grammatical categories and the representation of events, semantic relations and cohesion mechanisms. The hope was to foster the working out of shared categories and methodologies beyond the unavoidable constraints stemming from each contributor's theoretical standpoint.

This volume is the outcome of the effort each author made towards this goal. It has accordingly a sharp cross-linguistic bias: data and examples are drawn from a vast variety of signed and verbal languages, highlighting similarities and differences within and across language modalities. Thanks are due, in this connection, to all contributors for their generous willingness to such a confrontation and for their help in stepping over any disciplinary parochialism.

This volume is organized into four parts. In the first one, the related issues of iconicity vs. arbitrariness and linearity vs. simultaneity of the signifiers are addressed.

Christian Cuxac and Marie-Anne Sallandre, drawing on extensive evidence on the crucial role that modality-specific, "highly iconic" structures play in lexicon and grammar of signed languages (Cuxac 2000), identify and describe the three forms of iconicity detectable in French Sign Language: the imagic, the diagrammatic and the degenerated ones. They interestingly show that even the most imagic forms of iconicity are organized in macro-structures articulated themselves in compositional morphemic elements.

Paola Pietrandrea and Tommaso Russo compare the phenomena of iconicity characterizing verbal and signed languages. Their paper highlights that while imagic iconicity is pervasive in signed languages the iconicity detectable in verbal languages is to be ascribed primarily to the category of diagrams. The authors account for this difference by contrasting the simultaneous nature of visuo-gestural modality with the linear nature of phono-acoustic modality.

Both the articles reconsider foundational questions concerning the distribution of iconic vs. arbitrary features in natural languages and argue that the iconicity in signed languages does not contradict the Saussurean principle of Radical Arbitrariness. This principle can be motivated indeed on more solid grounds for both signed and verbal languages.

The four papers in the second part focus on units and levels of analysis. Diane Brentari discusses to what extent iconicity influences the organization of signed languages in levels of structures, most notably whether it does, or does not compromise the existence of an autonomous phonological level, and to what extent verbal and signed languages show the same levels of structures and dimensions of variations. Drawing on cross-linguistic data on American, Israeli, Hong Kong and Swiss-German signed languages, she underlines that the organizational principles of phonological structure are ruled by arbitrariness, and that it is possible to detect in sign an autonomous level of prosodic structure comparable to that of verbal languages.

Claire Blanche-Benveniste's chapter also deals with structural similarities between verbal and signed languages – but with a shift in perspective. Blanche-Benveniste argues that the units of analysis identifiable in the description of signed languages can be more appropriately compared to those worked out in the study of spontaneous spoken languages,

rather than to units that are proper of languages in their written form. In this perspective, signed languages turn out to be radically face-to-face languages, which explains many of their structural properties.

Sherman Wilcox's paper discusses how the gestural nature of signed languages comes to be organized, and undergoes grammaticalization processes that appear to be unique of the modality. Presenting data from American, Catalan, French and Italian signed languages, Wilcox notes that gesture may enter the signed linguistic system via two routes. Manual gestures may develop into lexical signs and further into grammatical morphemes. Expressive gestures evolve into prosodic phenomena (such as intensification and weakening, acceleration and slackening of the movement) and, in some cases, grammatical morphemes. This latter unusual process of grammaticalization suggests that the traditional view regarding levels of analysis as being rigidly, hierarchically organized does not hold for signed languages. In these languages in fact, prosody cannot be regarded as a level rigidly distinct from the lexicon and morphology, being a source of grammatical morphology.

Annarita Puglielli and Mara Frascarelli deal with phenomena of spoken languages involving the interface between syntax, on the one hand, and phonology, semantics and pragmatics on the other one. Moving from a generative standpoint, they analyze the conditions that regulate Topic and Focus operators and their intonational marking in spoken languages, and wonder whether comparable features can be found out in signed languages. Drawing primarily on data from ASL, they find that this is indeed the case: specific facial expressions act as formal correlates of intonation and signal different discourse categories encoded in a syntactic hierarchy. They stress the value of such a comparative analysis in order to clarify the relationship between structure and output.

Theory of grammar and lexical semantics are addressed in the three chapters included into the third part. Both Terry Janzen's and Raffaele Simone's papers address issues related to the universality vs. modality-dependency of grammatical categories. Phyllis Wilcox's study takes into account the dynamics of metaphors in signed vs. verbal languages.

Terry Janzen discusses a range of grammatical categories whose expression is often complicated, and somehow obscured, by the higher degree of fusion and by the simultaneous articulation of multiple morphemic structures engendered by the visuo-gestural modality of signed languages. Janzen also illustrates the peculiar grammatical complexity of signed languages by studying in detail two grammatical categories in American Signed Language: topic marking (and its grammaticalization), and perspective marking.

Raffaele Simone scrutinizes a set of grammatical features that can be assumed as crucial to language as such, irrespective of their modality of expression, within the framework of his "Construction and Category Grammar" (Simone 2006a, b). He takes into account in particular the possibility of creating constructional entities (like nouns) in signed and verbal languages and the tools that languages use to the crucial goal of keeping voices apart from each other in the utterance (what he calls "Voice Separation"). On the basis of a sketchy comparison of signed and verbal languages he suggests that several distinctive grammatical features of each type of code depend on the peculiar expression it uses, and that, as a consequence, verbal languages turn out to have a more restricted set of TAM features.

Phyllis Wilcox examines how metaphors in the domains of 'thought' and 'communication' are encoded in signed as compared to verbal languages. Her cross-linguistic data on American, British, Catalan, French, Italian and Japanese signed languages highlight that some metaphoric mappings found across these languages, such as IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, or MIND IS A CONTAINER, are very similar to those identified in verbal languages, suggesting modality-independent semantic regularities and related conceptual processes. However, other metaphors

such as IDEAS ARE LIQUIDS appear to be language-specific and uniquely cultural-driven. Relevant differences are also noted between metaphoric mappings more widely spread across signed languages but not found in a verbal language such as English, suggesting that modality-specific factors may be at work.

In the two chapters of the fourth part mechanisms of cohesion in signed and verbal languages are discussed.

Elena Pizzuto overviews deictic-anaphoric reference devices in signed languages, highlighting modality-specific features. Focusing on person reference operations she addresses a question that is still hotly debated in the sign language literature, namely to what extent the contiguity between the linguistic and the non-linguistic space influences the linguistic vs. non-linguistic (or ‘gestural’, as often labeled) properties of pronominal reference in sign. The author proposes that a clear distinction between non-linguistic and linguistic deixis and anaphora can be drawn on the grounds of receptive features proper of signed discourse, most notably the receiver’s gaze patterns. Pizzuto’s perspective highlights that signed languages’ structural features cannot be adequately described without considering face-to-face interaction as an “unavoidable, constant condition for any kind of signed communication to take place”.

Edoardo Lombardi Vallauri focuses on the relation between deixis and anaphora in verbal languages, questioning the legitimacy of a sharp differentiation between these two basic referential and text-cohesion devices. A thorough analysis of several linguistic parameters that have been proposed to draw the boundary between deixis and anaphora leads the author to conclude that a clear-cut distinction cannot be drawn, and that it would be more appropriate to consider anaphora as a special kind of deixis. Lombardi Vallauri also suggests that in the analysis of text cohesion devices in verbal languages it would be more fruitful to draw a distinction between gestural and symbolic mechanisms of reference. However, the data on signed languages highlight that this distinction also needs to be refined if we wish to apply it across signed and verbal languages.

One indication stemming from these two chapters is that a more comprehensive, modality-independent understanding of deixis and anaphora demands a broad semiotic perspective, and a thorough consideration of the common indexical features of such text cohesion devices.

On the whole, all chapters converge on emphasizing how deeply modality and the speech / sign opposition affect linguistic structure. They also contain hints towards defining shared constructs and methodologies able to lead to a more delicate understanding of modality-specific vs. modality-independent features of human natural languages.

It is indisputable that both signed and verbal languages have complex structures and that many crucial design features found out in signed languages can be described through constructs worked out on verbal languages. It is also obvious, however, that in many cases the structural categories worked out on the basis of the analysis of verbal languages do not perfectly fit signed languages. To quote one example, this appears to be true for the “highly iconic” structures and the multilinear structuring of linguistic information described, from different perspectives, by several contributors to the present volume. One cannot disregard that the limitations of verbal language-based categories may be due to the direct or indirect influence that theories of grammar mainly designed on written (rather than spoken) language have had on much past and current research (see Givon 2003: 74 ff., among others).

At any rate, it is clear that we need to rethink and refine our analytic and descriptive categories if we want to account not only for languages that are organized primarily (albeit not exclusively) linearly but also for languages that exhibit a substantial amount of simultaneously specified, multilinear structural features, and that are only employed in face-to-face situations. To this end it may be profitable for both signed and verbal languages specialists to have recourse more systematically to the knowledge acquired, over the last thirty-forty years, in the study and modeling of spoken (as distinguished from written) language (e.g., Pontecorvo and Blanche-Benveniste 1993, Biber *et al.* 1999). As some authors noticed (e.g. Pizzuto, Rossini and Russo 2006: 3) it is surprising that we still lack appropriate comparisons between corpora of signed and oral language. It is also likely that future research will need to use more systematically the findings arising from modern studies on coverbal gestures in spoken language (e.g., Kendon 2004, McNeill 2005) – a line of work already suggested or actively undertaken by some sign language researchers (see for example Brennan 1992, Liddell, 2003).

Looking from a wider standpoint, the simultaneous or multilinear nature of signed languages signifiers, and the iconic features they exhibit, endow these languages with the power of conveying more fine-grained lexical and grammatical meanings. This sheds a new light on the semantic studies of verbal languages, raising the question of how these can by-pass the constraints imposed by a primarily linear organization of information, and yet succeed in expressing comparable meanings.

In accordance with the remarks of Cuxac (2001; see also Cuxac and Sallandre, this volume), this question and the answers it demands may well open novel, fascinating perspectives for a more accurate modeling of human linguistic ability. Fully reversing the “assimilationist” view mentioned earlier, it would not be questionable to hypothesize that signed languages mirror more closely than verbal languages the prototypical features of face-to-face linguistic communication. Due precisely to their fully articulated gestural substance, signed languages could thus be employed as “analyzers of human language faculty”.

In order to develop research lines from such remarks, however, much research is still needed before reaching a consensus on what are the units and levels of analysis in signed languages, and on the extent to which comparable units and levels can, or cannot, be identified across signed and verbal languages.

We hope that the variety of perspectives provided in this volume can be instrumental in promoting a debate over crucial issues that still remain to be dealt with and lead to a cross-fertilization of the fields of signed and verbal languages.

The Editors

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