In the 40 years since linguists recognized sign languages to be full-fledged natural human languages on a par with spoken languages, sign language researchers have been studying numerous structural characteristics of a number of different, primarily Western, sign languages. However, the topic of word classes in sign languages remains curiously underrepresented in the literature on most known sign languages. Since the seminal work by Padden (1988), the major open word classes for American Sign Language have been assumed to be nouns, adjectives, and several sub-classes of verbs. Subsequent work on most other sign languages has, if word classes were addressed at all, often taken this kind of approach as a point of reference, but explicit discussions of characteristics of word classes and justifications for these classifications are the exception. Where such attempts are made, whether convincingly or not, the resulting analyses often look strikingly unlike the familiar Indo-European languages (e.g. Erlenkamp 2000 for German Sign Language, DGS and Zeshan 2000 for Indo-Pakistani Sign Language, IPSL). Moreover, it has been noted repeatedly that at first sight, signs often tend to be vague with respect to distinguishing between the familiar major word classes, as in these examples:

DGS (from Ebbinghaus 1998, translations added):

(1) ARBEIT  ‘the work, to work’
(2) GEHÖRLOS  ‘deaf, a deaf person’
(3) DENKEN  ‘to think, a thought’

Similarly, signs can often function equally well as both arguments and predicates in a sentence, as in these examples:

IPSL (4 and 5 from Zeshan 2000, translated from German):

(4) GIFT CAR  ‘The gift is a car.’  - predicate
(5) CAR HORN  ‘The horn of the car/car horn.’  - modifier
(6) CAR FAST  ‘The car is fast.’  - argument

Given the apparent difficulties with word class assignment in sign languages as well as the scarcity of previous work on the topic, it is clearly a matter of urgency to take a fresh, typologically informed look at word classes across sign languages.

This presentation focuses on adequate classifications of signs into word classes in several different sign languages. The basic premise here is that any such undertaking must be grounded in language-specific analysis. The data used for this word class analysis consist of natural signed discourses taken from three different sign languages, which are genetically and geographically unrelated. Several hours of video recordings in German Sign Language (DGS), Russian Sign Language and Kata Kolok, a village-based sign language in a community in Bali with a high incidence of hereditary deafness, constitute an organized data corpus.

In this presentation, we discuss semantic and morphological criteria for identifying word classes in the target sign languages. Selected signs drawn from the data corpus exemplify how
semantic and structural criteria can systematically be tested out, so that the characteristics of each sign can be classified, with the results eventually to be organized in a database. This way we can explore inductively which criteria are sufficient for being used as the basis of a word class typology and which are not.

Along the way, the systematic approach towards identifying word classes in sign languages also touches upon a number of fundamental unresolved questions in sign language morphology. The question of what constitutes a word in sign languages in the first place, as addressed, for instance, in Sandler 1999 and in Zeshan 2002, is far from resolved, and even more challenging is the highly problematic distinction between the phonemic and the morphemic levels of representation in sign languages (see, for instance, Fernald & Napoli 2000 about ‘phonomorphemes’ and Zeshan 2002 about ‘phonosymbolism’ in sign languages).

In spite of such difficulties, it is possible to develop a systematic approach towards word classes in sign languages. However, the main conclusion to be drawn from our study is that in all cases, word class assignment must be language-specific in the first instance, since different sign languages do indeed have different word classes. For instance, the class of agreement verbs (verbs that modify their movement direction to indicate the subject and object through the beginning and ending point of the movement, see Meir 2001) has been identified in all urban sign languages, but is lacking in Kata Kolok (Marsaja, forthcoming). The following examples are from the Kata Kolok corpus:

MAN RESPECT POLICE  ‘The man respects the police (officer).
YOU SIGN-COMMUNICATION ME  ‘You (should) ask me (in sign language).
CAMERA SEE  ‘S/he sees the camera.’

In other sign languages, transitive predicates such as ‘ask’, ‘see’, etc., have a hand movement that changes according to the subject and the object in the action, but Kata Kolok has no such class of predicates. Our study, which is still in progress, will no doubt reveal other differences between word classes in the three unrelated sign languages. Only after language-specific analyses have been resolved satisfactorily for a number of different sign languages can one proceed towards making generalizations across sign languages and ultimately across language modalities.

References:


