The use of emblems

Emblematic (quotable or symbolic) gestures may be strongly culture-specific. Their stable forms and meanings are easily recognised, independently of speech in common social interactions (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). This is of high value for deaf people and therefore are expected to be lexicalised in sign languages (Loon, Pfau & Steinbach, 2014; Morgan, 2016).

In West Africa, there seems to exist a set of emblems shared by hearing nonsigners across ethnic, linguistic and national borders (Brookes & Nyst, 2014), that seems to have been incorporated in the lexicons of sign languages. These emblems thus are part of a shared gestural substrate of these sign languages.

Methodology

The on-going Gesture Research in Africa (GESTURA) database project aims at documenting emblems of hearing speakers of African languages. A relatively large number of emblems are found to recur across languages and cultures. Out of these, 30 emblems were selected.

1. 20 hearing participants were asked to produce gestures in response to the messages of the 30 emblems selected.
2. 46 deaf signers, as expert observers of hearing communication, were asked about the emblems used by hearing people.

Research questions

1. Incorporation of emblems in LGG
   All hearing emblems identified have been incorporated in the lexicon of LGG. The form and meaning relation between an emblem and its lexical counterpart in LGG comes in the types:
   - one-to-one relation,
   - few-to-few relation,
   - many-to-many relation,
   as illustrated in the right. In LGG, there is a tendency for the first type.

2. Specialization of meaning in LGG
   Emblems with more than one form to meaning relation are incorporated in the lexicon with specialized meanings. For example, the two emblems given for ‘deadly’ were lexicalised as DIE and KILL.
   For some sensitive semantic domains, new signs were created to reduce its understandability by hearing nonsigners, like in CRIMINAL and STEAL.

LGG background

In Guinea-Bissau, deaf people were brought together for the first time in 2004 (first school for the deaf).

Since then, the Sign Language of Guinea-Bissau (LGG) has been emerging spontaneously in a fast growing deaf community of currently around 400 deaf people, with little, if any, influence of other languages, signed or oral (Martins & Morgado, 2016, 2017).

In Guinea-Bissau, hearing people in social interactions with deaf people seem to use a particularly extensive set of common, conventional gestures.

Participants were interviewed in groups of 4, highlighting aspects such as:
   a) time of response, b) general agreement, c) discussion about its real use, d) pragmatic examples in daily communication, e) explanation of its original pantomimic.

Identified emblems were then compared in form and meaning to their lexical counterparts, as documented in LGG dictionary (Martins & Morgado, 2017).

References


Acknowledgements

This research is supported by a PhD fellowship granted by Portuguese funds. Graduate in the Deaf Community of Guinea-Bissau, especially to the Deaf school and the Deaf association in Bissau.