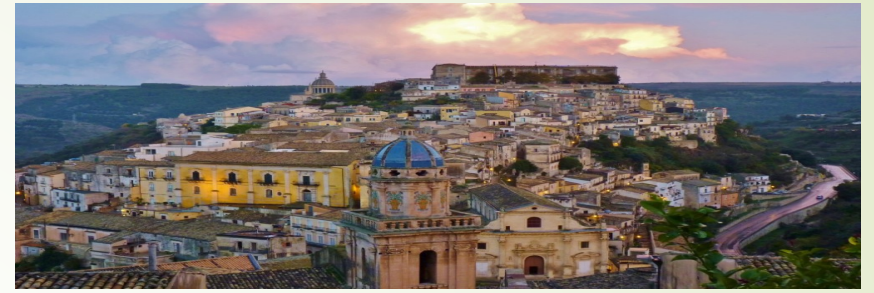UNIVERSITÀ degli STUDI di CATANIA

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Metalinguistic awareness in Sign language: a study on mouth actions

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Aims

- Levels of linguistic awareness of mouth actions;
- Linguistic attitude and perception of mouth actions.

Overview

- 1. Metalinguistic Awareness (MLA) in sign language: epistemological considerations;

- 2. How to elicit linguistic awareness in signers

- 3. Academic views /LIS signers views on mouthings;

- 4. A study on mouthings

- 5. Results: epilinguistic, epi-metalinguistic-metalinguistic awareness

- Conclusions

What is metalinguistic awareness?

➡ an explicit knowledge about the structural features of a certain language

Pinto & Candilera 2000; El Euch & Huot 2015

1. Epistemological considerations

- Various studies have explored metalinguistic awareness (MLA) in Sign language

  Morgan G., 2006; Rathmann *et al.*, 2007; Kaul et al., 2014;
  Rinaldi et al., 2017; Sze, Tang, 2017.

- Recently, metalinguistic awareness has been discussed in relation to the following factors:

  - the nature of language transmission
  - the linguistic repertoire
  - the linguistic perception and attitudes
  - the status and official recognition of the language

  Fontana, 2017

There are levels of different kinds of linguistic awareness:

➡ The basic level (epilinguistic) includes automatic sub-conscious assessments that one makes, based on the addressee's language use.

➡ The intermediate level (epi-metalinguistic) is a more conscious judgement on how linguistic utterances should be produced.

➡ The highest level (metalinguistic) occurs when language is reflected upon and analysed.

Auroux 1998, Culioli 1979; 2014

1. Epistemological considerations

There are also conditions of linguistic awareness

➡ One must be aware that one

- Is using a language that is different from other languages;

- Values this language as a true language;

- Has a cultural and linguistic identity connected with this language.

2. How to elicit linguistic awareness in signers?

➤ Our approach is based upon the

- Ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974)

- Participant observation technique (De Walt and De Walt, 1998)

Meeting people in their context

1. Elicit their general perception of sample of signing

2. Elicit their judgement of specific features of SL (mouthings)

■ language is a social action shaped by perception and attitude

Academic views on mouth actions and on mouthings

Following the distinction between academic knowledge and everyday ideology suggested by Kusters and Sahasrabudhe (2018)

- Various studies have grouped them into two categories according to whether or not they can be linked to the movements made when speaking (Boyes Braem and Sutton Spence, 2001)

- Often, mouthings are not considered part of sign language

- Formal LIS teaching does not take into consideration mouthings. Sometimes it considers mouth gestures but rules for using mouthings are usually not discussed.

- LIS teachers do not use mouthings in the first classes because they are afraid students would learn more lipreading than signs (Di Stasio, 2018).

LIS Signers' views of mouthings

- LIS Signers perceive mouthings as semiotic resources to be used following communicative needs no matter whether they have a link with speech or not.

- They categorized them as mouth-open, voice or mouth-clear.

- They feel that signing without mouthing is not appropriate.

Fontana and Raniolo, 2015

Our study on mouthings

- Participants
- Materials
- Data collection methodology
- Results

Participants

- Our hypothesis was that younger and older participants would have different attitudes towards mouthings

- Age: 20-50 / 50-80 (9 participants in each group);

- Early exposure to sign language.

Materials

- Three videos selected from websites:

  1. A life story with many mouthings

  2. Description of a forthcoming event with mouthings

  3. Description of a forthcoming event with few mouthings

  4. Description of a forthcoming event with no mouthings (used only to participants who expressed some doubts of some kind about the 3rd video).

http://www.grupposilis.it/notizieinlis/index.php/esperienza-di-vita-e-lavoro/cinema-teatro-musica/45-regista-1-parte-2
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=34&v=nDXSPCBihF8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wNfVF-24XY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3usBkpvh4c

Data collection methodology

- Data collected by a deaf interviewer in an informal natural setting (e.g. in a holiday setting, at home and other events)
- Participants were asked four questions :
  1. Which of the 3 signers do you like best?
  2. Why do you think this signer is better? And why not?
  3. Do you think generally that the lack of using of mouthings can affect understanding or attention?
  4. Do you consider yourself a signer who uses mouthings a lot?
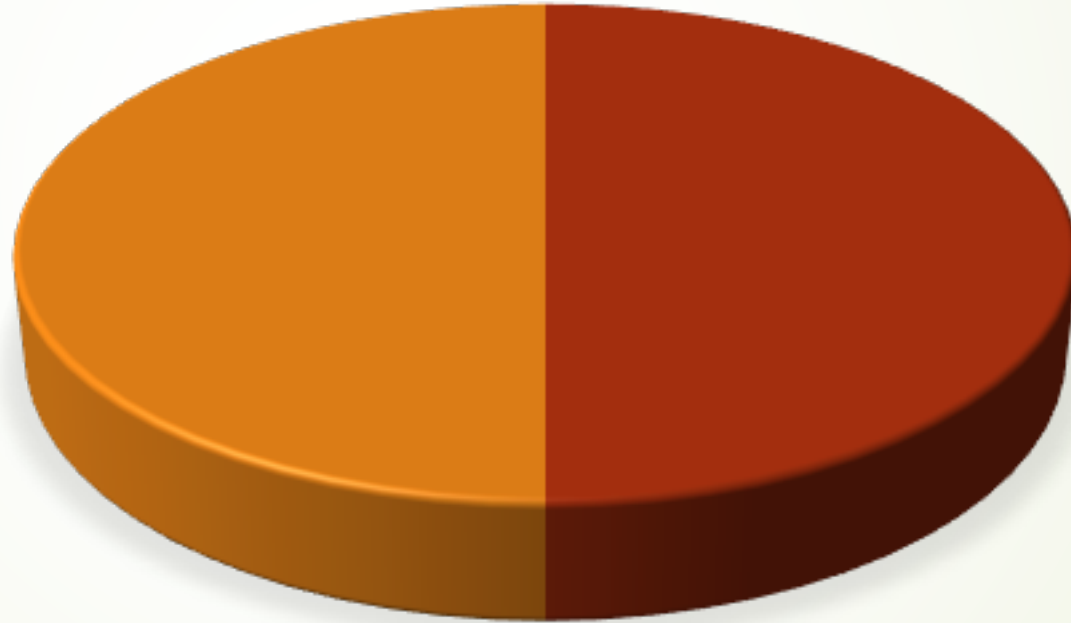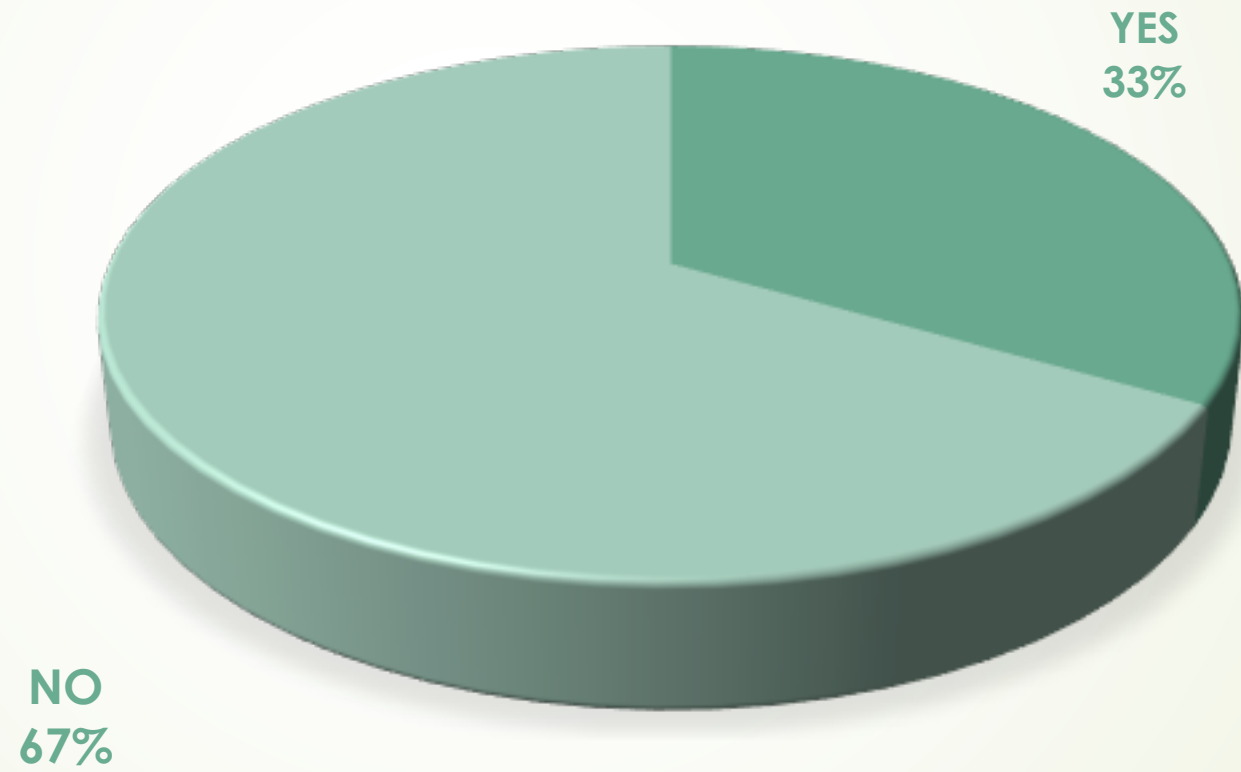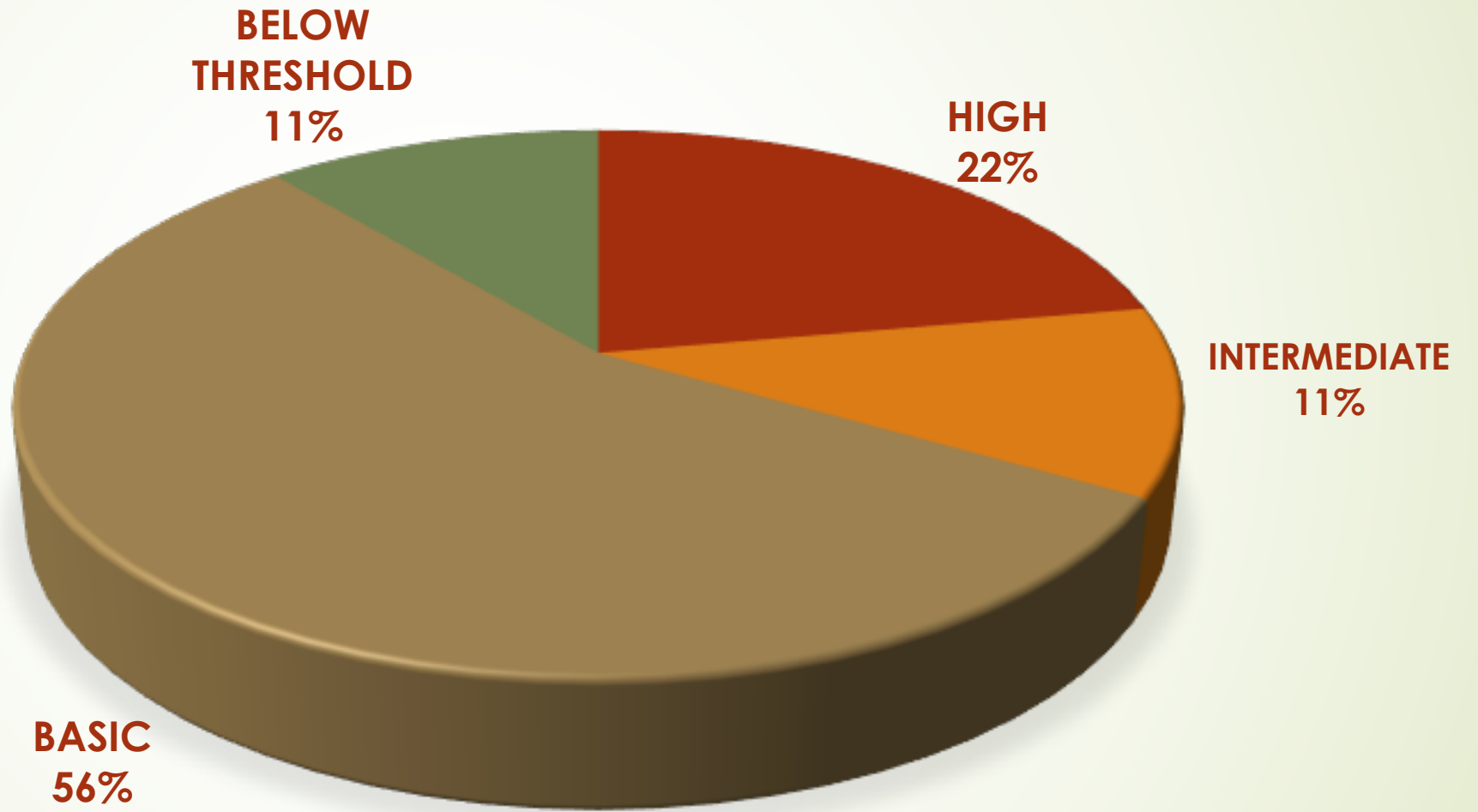
Gender

FEMALE
39%

MALE
61%

Age

Teacher LIS

YES
33%

NO
67%
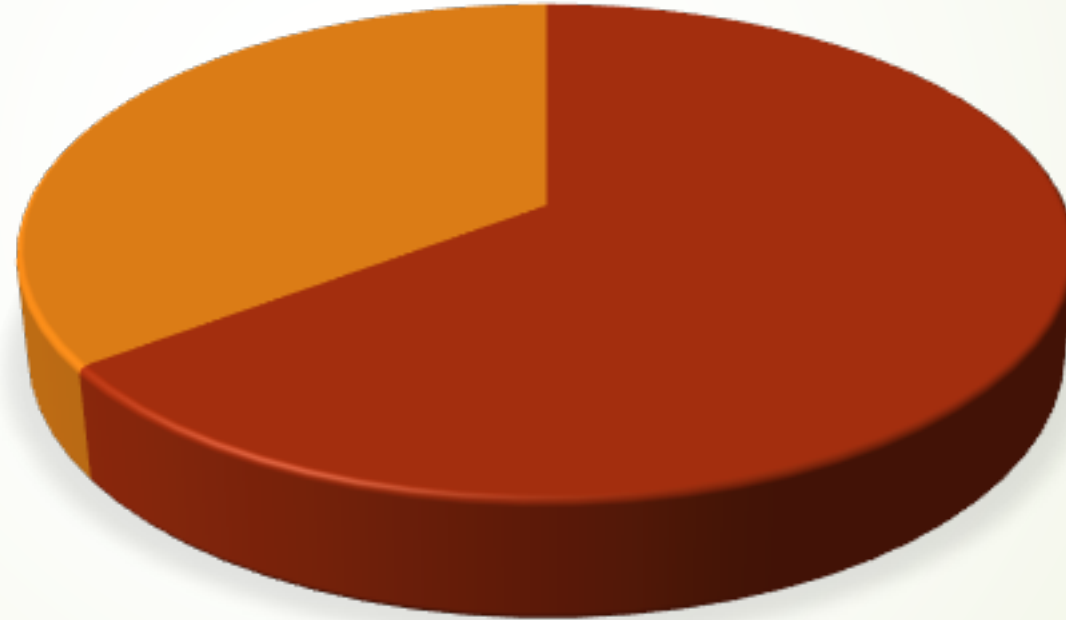
Levels of awareness (basic etc)

Video preferred Specify with mouthings

Analysis, «Why not Video 3»?

- It's no natural; it's like they are making an effort

- Not taking a breath

- I do not feel comfortable when people don'use use mouthings: they look cold, without facial expression and unpleasant

- I do not want to be speechless

- I do not like not using no speech (older person)

- Signing is not fluent

- Signing is not natural

Results

- Perception of mouthings is not influenced by variables such as gender, age, and experience as a LIS teacher.

- Almost all participants display some level of linguistic awareness.

- Only the group 20-50 showed the higher level of metalinguistic awareness.

- Only two older participants did not express any kind of judgements; they consider all the videos similar and said it did not matter if mouthings were used or not.

Conclusions

- Although the functions of mouthings have been considered by academics quite controversial, they are felt by LIS deaf signers to be a necessary part of their sign language.

- An ethnographic approach to the exploration of signers' perception of mouthings is important for understanding the nature and the use of mouthings not only for the linguistic description of the language but also in order to include this knowlege in teaching and assessment of the language.

Thank you!!!

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