



ISCH COST Action IS1006 SignGram



STSM final report

Barcelona, March 24th 2014

Dear STSM coordinator,

This is to notify that the following STSM:

Beneficiary: Gemma Barberà Altimira

Host: Markus Steinbach, Georg-August-Universität

Period: From March 10th to March 21st 2014

Place: Göttingen (Germany)

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started and finished in the expected dates.

The main goal of this Short Term Scientific Mission was to provide a description and a further analysis of the manual and nonmanual strategies that two particular sign languages (Catalan Sign Language, LSC; and German Sign Language, DGS) use to organise discourse. After a careful analysis of the Aesop fables in LSC and DGS and discussions with Prof. Markus Steinbach and Dr. Annika Herrmann, a decision was taken concerning the data to be used for this project. The Aesop fables would only be used as a starting point to get an idea of how nonmanuals contribute to the overall discourse structure in each language, due to the peculiarities of narration as a particular discourse genre. Importantly, this observation needed to be contrasted with other kinds of data. In order to have parallel data for the cross-linguistic study, data elicitation materials have been created. The final purpose of this project is to analyse the correlation between the accessibility of a discourse referent functioning as antecedent and the nonmanual co-occurring with the anaphoric pronoun. This study



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will provide interesting insights of how discourse structure is built in sign language and the role that prosodic nonmanual marking has in anaphoric relations beyond the sentence level.

The elicitation materials have already been prepared. The nonmanuals that are considered consist, on the one hand, in squinted eyes, which according to the literature serve as a signal to indicate the low accessibility status of the linguistic material that it is aligned with (Dackovsky and Sandler 2009). On the other hand, brow raised, which is used to signal topic marking, and the interaction between squinted eyes and brow raised are included. In order to achieve a better understanding of how anaphoric relations beyond the sentence level work, a pre-study of pronoun resolution has been designed to test the nonmanual marking that is more felicitous in each context. The conditions considered are distance between the antecedent and the anaphoric pronoun, in terms of number of utterances, and competition of intervening discourse referents, distinguished according to the semantics ((non-)animacy and humanness). Various criteria have been crucially taken into account, namely the same amount of constituents in each sentence, as well as no use of signing space with respect to localisation and use of classifiers, among others. These criteria allow to control that the results are not biased by the localisation of the antecedent in signing space and that the nonmanuals are taken as the unique cue for the pronoun resolution. The elicitation materials will be used for Catalan Sign Language (LSC) and German Sign Language (DGS), respectively, and they will be tested and used with different informants. A schedule has been prepared in order to have preliminary results of this cross-linguistic research that can be discussed during long distance interactions and in the upcoming COST meeting in Venice (June, 11-13 2014).

The preparation of these elicitation materials led to interesting discussions concerning data elicitation in sign languages. Two very important aspects are: (i) the different kinds of data elicitation that are used in the sign language research community and the advantages and disadvantages that each one per se has; (ii) optimal elicitation tasks used in each grammatical model have also been considered. This is an issue very relevant for the Action and the output of the discussions was to develop the table of contents and structure of a joint article about methodological issues in sign language elicitation data.

The Aesop fables recorded and signed in LSC and DGS used at the observation stage of the study were also the object of interesting discussions with Dr. Herrmann and PhD and MA students within the research group. First, the annotation conventions used in the fables corpus of the two languages were examined with the goal of reaching compatible criteria for the annotation. This will allow further comparative studies. After that, particular linguistic aspects concerning the use of classifier handshapes and role shift/constructed action were debated.

Finally, contexts that typically arise an impersonal reference reading were also discussed. The Sign Language Research Group at the University of Göttingen will use the contexts and sentences used in LSC with the final goal of providing an exploratory study of how impersonal reference works in DGS. The results will be presented at an international workshop organised in February 2015. These results will also be incorporated in the dedicated part of the blueprint that the Action is preparing (WG3, Section 2 “The meaning of text and discourse”, subsection 2.1.5 “Impersonal reference”).

Overall, this STSM turned out to be very productive and with interesting outcome that directly links to the writing of the blueprint. It stands as an important contribution to WG3 because of the consideration of the semantic and pragmatic properties of nonmanual marking (linked part with WG1), and general discourse structure considering the cohesive links among discourse referents. Importantly, the outcome contributes to the preparation of the section 2.5 “Discourse structure” of



WG3. Moreover, cooperative work has been established within international research groups. The lines of collaborative research established will culminate in various publications.

With my best regards,
Gemma Barberà



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