

**Work plan for STSM to University of Venice Ca' Foscari (Venice, Italy)**

**Sign action number:** IS 1006

**Title of the action:** Unravelling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage

**Action short name:** SignGram COST Action

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**Host Institution:** University of Venice Ca' Foscari

**Period of stay:** June 17, 2013 - June 21, 2013

**STSM Title:** Wh-duplication in Italian Sign Language (LIS) and British Sign Language (BSL)

## General overview

Despite the fact that the study of wh-questions has become increasingly popular in general linguistics, this topic has remained rather understudied in sign languages until relatively recently. Some recent work on wh-questions has been published in American Sign Language (ASL) (Neidle, MacLaughlin, Lee, Bahan & Kegl, 1998; Petronio & Lillo-Martin, 1997), German Sign Language (DGS) (Pfau & Steinbach, 2005) and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) (Wallingford, 2008). However, the topic has been surrounded by controversy over the syntactic and methodological analysis of wh-questions (Neidle et al., 1997; Petronio & Lillo-Martin, 1997). With reference to spoken languages, Kayne (1994) proposes that when two wh-question forms refer to the same subject all syntactic movement is leftwards. In sign language research, Van Gijn (2004) proposed a leftward wh-movement in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), supporting previous findings in ASL (Petronio & Lillo-Martin, 1997). In contrast, Neidle et al. (2000) in ASL and Cecchetto et al. (2009) in Italian Sign Language (LIS) proposed that movement was rightwards and therefore a right-location of Spec-CP. The relevance of wh-questions in comparative and descriptive analysis relies not only on their universal nature but also on the fact that they are highly informative about syntactic structure. By studying wh-questions, it is possible to better understand the rules of usage of an essential communicative structure present in all languages.

Typically, wh-question forms in sign languages can appear in three positions: clause initial (see Example 1a), clause final (see Example 1b) or clause initial and final (see Example 1c), and research has shown that position preference is dependent on linguistic and social factors (see Geraci & Bayley 2011, Geraci et al. to appear). In NZSL, McKee (2006) found that clause final or wh-duplication were favoured above clause initial position. The latter was also the favoured position in Wallingford's (2008) NZSL dataset. Wh-duplication, will serve as the main focus of comparative investigation between BSL and LIS, given the recent work on wh-duplication in LIS. Wh-duplication is a well documented phenomenon in sign languages (see Petronio & Lillo-Martin 1997, Neidle *et al.* 2000, Nunes & Quadros 2006 and Zeshan 2006). Branchini, Cardinaletti, Cecchetto, Donati & Geraci (2012) investigated two types of wh-duplication: identical and non-identical. In the former, wh-signs were considered to be phonologically and morphologically identical while in the latter wh-signs displayed a different lexical realisation. In their paper on wh-duplication, Branchini et al. (2012) describe the two distinct types of duplication, focusing mainly on identical wh-duplication. Despite wh-signs appearing to be identical in identical wh-duplication, they find that they differ in duration and that this is due to a phrase-final lengthening effect. This said, the phenomenon is not limited to wh-duplication. Wh-duplication will be investigated, in the same capacity, in British Sign Language (BSL) as part of this STSM.

Example 1 (in NZSL) (Wallingford, 2008):

a) clause initial

WHEN YOUR BIRTHDAY

'When is your birthday?'

b) clause final

YOUR UNCLE WORK WHAT

'What does your uncle do/work as?'

c) clause initial & final - wh-duplication

WHO CAN BABY SIT WHO

'Who can baby-sit?'

The main aim of this STSM will be to examine wh-question constructions and more specifically wh-duplication in BSL, providing a syntactic analysis and making a comparison to wh-question constructions identified in LIS. The data will be taken from the LIS and BSL Corpus Projects, which are described below. This analysis will provide

cross-linguistic evidence of two unrelated sign languages to establish the general trend in structure in wh-questions and wh-duplication in all sign languages.

### **Datasets**

Creating a corpus has become increasingly important in order to document a language, its regional variations as well as serving to heighten the status of a language and being a fundamental tool to create a grammar. In this project I plan to work on the datasets from two corpora: LIS (<http://w3.uniroma1.it/progettolis/index.php>) and the BSL Corpus Projects (<http://www.bslcorpusproject.org/>). The BSL Corpus Project started in January 2008 and was led by staff at the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) at University College London, and included researchers from Bangor University (Wales), Heriot-Watt University (Scotland), Queens University Belfast (Northern Ireland) and the University of Bristol (England). In October 2008, researchers from the University of Rome La Sapienza, University of Milan-Bicocca and the University of Venice Ca' Foscari commenced their collection of the LIS Corpus Project. The aims of the corpora were twofold: to collect a corpus of video clips of deaf signers representative of their respective sign languages and to use this data for sociolinguistic investigations.

The two corpora followed similar methodologies as those used in the first large-scale sign language collections in ASL (Lucas et al., 2001) and Auslan (Johnston & Schembri, 2004). The BSL Corpus Project included 249 signers from 8 collection sites across the UK. For the LIS Corpus Project, data was collected from 165 subjects interviewed in 10 cities. Participants were filmed in a range of different settings including a narrative, conversation, interview and lexical elicitation tasks. Participants in the LIS Corpus Project also completed a question-answer elicitation task, not included in the BSL Corpus Project. The wh-questions elicited as part of the task will be the focus of this STSM. During the question-answer elicitation task, one participant was shown a scene (e.g., a car accident) whilst their partner was given a form to gather information from their partner about the details of their scene. This task elicited numerous examples of interrogative structures (i.e., wh-questions). The dependent variable in this sociolinguistic investigation is the position of the wh-question with respect to the predicate (e.g., clause initial, final, duplication). Each token was also coded with the following information: type of wh-question (e.g., who, what, why), syntactic function (e.g., subject, object, adjunct) and the question type (e.g., direct, indirect, echo question).

### **Outline of the STSM and working plan**

The primary goal of the STSM is to compare wh-question constructions from LIS and BSL using the data from their respective corpora. More specifically, this project will be a comparative analysis of wh-duplication following the current research on wh-duplication in LIS. I am planning to spend a week at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari. By visiting the team of researchers working on the LIS Corpus Project, this will provide an opportunity for collaboration, given that both datasets are based on corpora with comparable methodologies. In order to compare the wh-questions elicited in the LIS Corpus Project, the BSL Corpus Project data is being annotated for clause units - the methodology for determining clause segmentation across sign languages will be discussed. This will make the corpus searchable and data may be extracted from the BSL Corpus Project. Findings from LIS and BSL Corpus Projects will be compared and dissemination of these results can form a comparative publication. One week should be sufficient to allow for discussion between myself and the team of researchers working on the LIS Corpus Project (namely, Chiara Branchini, and Anna Cardinaletti based at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari), extract wh-question constructions from the BSL Corpus Project, count those that show wh-duplication, code and analyse the data, compare the data with the LIS Corpus dataset and discuss the findings. This research will reveal whether similar types and patterns of wh-duplication are found in the BSL

corpus as those found so far in the LIS corpus.

This project will pave the way for a more systematic analysis of wh-questions, furthering our understanding of grammars in sign language and natural language in general. This fits in with the goals the COST Action in characterising and comparing European sign languages.